

# HABIT

By

Darryl Francis Zanuck





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HABIT  
AND  
OTHER SHORT STORIES





# HABIT

AND

## OTHER SHORT STORIES

BY  
DARRYL FRANCIS ZANUCK

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*"The Man Who Lived Twice"*  
*"Recoil," Etc.*

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Dedicated to my eminent friend, A. F. Foster, whose untiring efforts in desert research were finally successful in the remarkable discovery of the amazing ingredients contained in the desert yucca plant, and through whose hospitality to the author while devoted to the study of desert topics and characters, inspired the final narrative in this volume.

Darryl Francis Zannett-





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HABIT





# HABIT

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## CHAPTER I

Ling Foo Gow riveted his jet orbs on the burly figure that advanced on the narrow sidewalk of cracked asphalt, and with an excessive display of facial contortion, brought the aged lines of his poppy-hued countenance to an intensified scowl. His lean bony fingers with their three-inch ceremonial nails, clenched fiercely about the handle of the bamboo basket they held, and tiny beads of perspiration glistened beneath the coiled wad of oily black hair that was his queue.

The huge clock on the brick tower of St. Mary's Church marked the hour as ten, and already the lane that calls itself Grant Avenue was brimming and swaying boisterously with the night tide. From the base of the cobblestoned slope at Bush Street to the rectangular intersection at Columbus Avenue the sagging balconies that protruded over Chinatown's White Way hung gayly with bright paper lanterns which played in the cool breeze that blew in from the cliffs of Golden Gate. The Oriental chop-suey establishments, and casinos of Manchu and Cantonese revelry, were crowded to the lily potted portals with throngs of heterogeneous denizens. On the sharp corners and against the crumbling surface of bulletin-posted walls, gutter fires blackened coal oil tins and cast grotesque shadows to mingle with the purplish halo of gaunt lamp posts.

Upstairs in the feast chamber of The Way Far Low Cafe, the crash of brass gongs and clatter of wood drums made a brilliant attempt to drown out in volume a quartette of reed flutes and a chorus of sing-song girls—but failed

miserably, due more than less to the incessant yelps that heralded a frightened contingent of penned dogs and pigs in the odorous meat market of Len Sin, on the floor below.

Behind sealed barriers, a dozen doors away on Waverly Place, a circle of yellow faces marked with sighs and smiles the everchanging tide of gambled gold. In the Bow Wong Joss Temple on the Jackson Street grade, the notorious guide "Bluffer" Williams, revealed the exotic forms of Chinese worship to a score of wide-eyed tourists—and when positive that his clients were attracted elsewhere, he cast a sly wink to the huddled figure of Lee Iy, the Oriental attendant. The latter presently offered for the sum of five American dollars the one remaining glass button from the uniform collar of Fu Gil, China's famous revolutionary hero. With glycerine tears swiftly applied to his squinting eyes, Lee Iy parted with his treasure to a gentleman from Iowa—and annexed five silver dollars to the wealth of Williams and Iy, Inc.

At the gorgeous gold and ebony carved portals of the Sing Fat Bazar, a throng congregated on the curbing to watch the arrest of an intoxicated sailor who had done his utmost to feed peanuts to an ivory image of Buddha. In the hollow of Portsmouth Square, Se Wow, the soothsayer, conferred on the topic of a lower tariff with a group of merchants and apothecarians. Across the lane in the shadows, Steve Mulligan of the Chinatown Squad roused a doped derelict with a jab of his night stick.

And thus it went, on and on, scene after scene, page after page, as Ling Foo Gow watched with seething hatred the bold, swaggering advance of his one and only enemy—Bull Lung, the incomparable brute half caste of Chinatown.

Now Bull Lung in broad daylight and aided by dazzling sunshine was not a sweet or delicious feast for human eyes, and it is not difficult to imagine the after dark effect of

scarlet rays from a gutter fire, the yellow aureole of a painted lantern, and the purplish tint of a sputtering gas jet, on his oily, repulsive features. In stature he was fully three times the size of Ling Foo Gow—a mammoth bulk of muscle, set off by pin-point eyes and a clean shaven head, bullet shaped. His father (so it was rumored) had been a prize fighter of Occidental origin; his mother (it was known) an ornamental female of Chinese ancestry. He was no more nor less than what could be expected. And this particular night found him at his worst.

Reaching the painted wall of a jade and curio shop where Ling Foo Gow stood motionless clutching his bamboo basket and eyeing his coming, Bull Lung hesitated his bold gait, and an ugly sneer twisted his puffed lips. His small eyes fastened their points on the huddled figure and twinkled.

“If it ain’t my old friend, the dummy!” he snarled in a boisterous voice, stopping and facing the aged Oriental. “How’s the deaf an’ dumb infant, tonight?” he asked in the next breath. “Crazier than usual—or just the same?”

Ling Foo Gow crouched back against the wall in the dim light. His beady eyes sparked like balls of fire between their narrow knife-like lids. Froth seeped from the corners of his gaping mouth as he curved his lips to form words of defiance. But none came, for Ling Foo Gow was a notorious curiosity of the little colony on the hill. He was the one mute in all San Francisco’s Chinatown. And none took advantage of the vast handicap as did the bullying half caste. Although he was unable to hear his enemy’s derogatory remarks, he grasped from encounters in the past their significance, which had the effect of soaring his fear to greater heights than the actual utterance even suggested. He knew the reputation Bull Lung boasted, and, furthermore, he had suffered from the proof of it.



"That's right, yuh sap," Bull Lung continued, raising his muscle-bulging arm to the level of the Oriental's limp jaw as though to strike an elbow blow. "Froth at me, make your googly eyes at me—but not a move or I'll bust yuh cold!"

Ling Foo Gow leaned back against the wall to steady his trembling frame. The basket quivered in the grasp of his bony hands and prompted an ugly laugh from his enemy. As the Oriental's fear and wrath increased the half caste's merriment blossomed accordingly. It was a vile scene that presently ensued. Vile, even for Chinatown, where almost anything happens.

"How you do love me!" Bull Lung growled, the laughter leaving his voice. "I should kill you, I suppose—like they kill pigs—but you give me too much amusement for that. You're too damn funny!" The half caste lunged a massive hand into the bamboo basket that trembled in Ling Foo Gow's quivering grip, and jerked forth a dripping handful of coffee-colored lychee nuts.

"My usual collection for havin' the rare opportunity to entertain me," he snickered, stuffing away the nuts in the bulge of a jacket pocket. Then, not desiring to waste more time, he cleared his throat with a loud guttural utterance and spat full in the face of Ling Foo Gow. So delighted was he by the nauseating result, that his gurgling laughter failed to cease until he had climbed a dingy stairway to the recesses of an illicit gaming house that bore his name.

It was all of half an hour afterwards before the peddler of lychee nuts was able to regain his usual immobile expression and calm the passion for revenge that boiled turbulently within him. His conduct following the disgraceful insult had been as usual,—for it was the half caste's nightly work to steal the handful of nuts and enrage Ling Foo Gow by similar scenes. A mute, aged and helpless, the Oriental

was entirely void of means or manner to defend himself. Often he had appealed with pleading glances or beckoning gestures to fellow kinsmen for assistance, but Bull Lung was too mighty a power in the colony, and Ling Foo Gow went forever unaided.

Fifteen minutes later he sold three ten cent bags of lychee nuts to a party of tourists who wandered down California Street, and life again resumed natural proportions for the peddler of nuts, Ling Foo Gow.

## CHAPTER II

It was one o'clock now, and the swaying streams of human traffic on the Grant Avenue lane had thinned to almost desertion. From the Bay the cool breeze swept a thin veil of pearl painted fog, and already Telegraph Hill dozed in a mantle of oblivion. The scarlet glow of fading coals marked the base of gutter fires that had flared brightly an hour previous. On the steep cross-streets the usual traffic of clattering cable cars and top-heavy taxicabs had vanished. Thick shutters barred the merchant windows and darkness hid the gaudy bazars. Chinatown had left its gay exotic camouflage for the forbidden realms below the surface. For the true yellowman, night-life had just begun.

Ling Foo Gow emerged from a doorway that protruded over the cobblestones of Ross Alley, and proceeded toward the junction of Pacific Street. He had parted with his last bag of nuts to Wing Yat, the apothecarian. Payment had been given in the form of in-gu-pai, and already the effect of the Chinese whiskey pricked his aged veins with a vivid spark of alertness. In a swift glide, he shuffled his paper-soled sandals up the slope till he was opposite the shop of Tears of the Sea. Then he crossed over to Jackson Street and continued until the whitewashed stump of a fire hydrant loomed up suddenly from the curtain of fog and he knew he neared his destination. It was chilly, for the gray mist had descended rapidly, and he paused to tighten the bosom lace of his tunic and lift the frayed collar of his hugely misfitting jacket.

For ten years Ling Foo Gow had made his residence in the third cellar down of Hong Chung's House of Silver Eyes. The proprietor did a thriving business in the im-

portation of raw opium and Ling Foo Gow, if he thought about them at all, thought his quarters quite luxurious. Always the acrid tang of cooking pills hung bitter in the heavy air, and to be able to inhale this familiar aroma held especial charms for the peddler of nuts. When finances refused him, and the sale of lychee was poor, he would sit for hours on the dirt floor of his cellar chamber and breathe the pungent atmosphere. When his profits were plentiful, he did not bother, but went each night to the Palace of Dreams, maintained by the crafty Yen Chow. Here was his Seventh Heaven.

Tonight, his mental functioning departed from its usual simplicity, and he experienced the urge to pass by the professional establishment of his enemy. Therefore instead of turning into Fish Alley, he continued down Jackson Street a hundred paces and halted beneath a wooden awning that shadowed the narrow sidewalk. His eyes lifted to the bright lights that shone in a flower-carved window on the second flight of a brick building across the street. This was the lottery house of Bull Lung, and Ling Foo Gow realized with a scowl that bright lights signified the half caste's prosperity. Then he fumbled the prickly surface of a lychee nut and curved his lips to a vague smile. The nut crumbled beneath the pressure of his thumb and forefinger. He tossed it to the gutter and brushed each hand with the palm of the other. Then he smiled again and continued his progress which presently led him into the darkness of a narrow brick-lined passageway. This was a direct exit to Fish Alley and meant the saving of as many as seventy paces.

But tonight it was more than that. It was the greatest step in his life of sixty more or less honorable years. And also, the next five minutes were the most important in his entire existence. With his shuffling entrance into



that tunnel-like passageway, life for Ling Foo Gow had only begun.

With a single glance he recognized her,—although he knew by the overhead position of the one glowing lantern that cut the darkness, his own figure was secreted by thick shadows. She was as dainty, as youthful, as pretty as ever—Mell Wing, daughter of the wealthy antique dealer—and for a moment he held a rigid poise as her patter on the cobblestones drew nearer. It was the most fortunate thing Ling Foo Gow ever did.

The sight of her in pale clinging silks and gold spattered jade ornaments, brought delicious memories to the vision screen within the mind of the peddler of nuts. Since the abrupt departure of his august friend to the Seventh Heaven, Te Gut, the poet, who had ventured astray in the late Tong Festival and encountered an angry hatchet-boy, the gorgeous Mell Wing had been the single ray of bliss on his rather stormy horizon. Never did she fail to cast him a cherry-tinted smile as they met on the lane, or a glance of mercy from her kind almond shaped eyes. And always her purchase of nuts was daily. Once when a group of vulgar newsboys had stoned him and mocked his muteness, it had been Mell Wing who boldly interfered in his behalf, and Ling Foo Gow knew that never would he forget that rare deed of kindness. His passionate respect for her, which almost rivaled his inbred desire for poppy juice, and his loathing enmity for Bull Lung, were the two predominating thoughts of the very few that functioned in his mind. With him they were an obsession. The lofty pinnacle and dire abyss of his very existence.

And now as he paused in the dim shadows and clung silently to the face of a brick wall, Ling Foo Gow was abruptly jerked from sweet dreams and delightful memories by the sudden, almost magical, appearance of his enemy



in the path of the advancing Mell Wing. The bulky half caste had swiftly slid from an unchartered doorway on the opposite side of the narrow passageway from where the peddler of nuts watched, and now he stood waiting defiantly, with legs spread wide apart, arms folded across his thick chest, and an egotistical grin curling his lips.

It was obvious, even to the unobserved Ling Foo Gow, that the daughter of the antique dealer was deeply stirred by the abrupt appearance of the human barrier in her path. At first she continued at a normal patten as though nothing had occurred to upset her evidently perfectly balanced equanimity, but when Bull Lung failed to budge and his grin broadened to an ugly sneer, Mell Wing turned in fear and fled as rapidly as her tiny satin sandals would permit, which was hardly more than a dozen short paces, for the half caste easily caught her in the powerful grasp of his muscular arms and subdued a scream she managed to utter with a brutal grip on the velvet tenderness of her throat.

And thus it came to pass within the brief period of a single minute, that Mell Wing changed from an honorable daughter of the Orient, breathing, youthful and gorgeous, to a limp, unconscious body in the hands of a snarling brute. And Ling Foo Gow missed not one detail of the encounter and transformation. It is true that creamy bubbles of froth sputtered from his gaping mouth and his frame trembled palsy-like with fear. But it is likewise true that he held his rigid motionless poise throughout the ordeal and waived absolutely the obvious duty of interference. For Ling Foo Gow was undeniably, first, last and always, a coward. To dash heroically to the rescue of the female was paramount among the favorable thoughts in his mind, but was as impossible as his inability to speak or hear.

It was not personally the physical danger of engaging in combat with his enemy that forbade this intervention—it

was the mental incapacity. Such frightful illusions as facing his foe in fistic warfare, never seeped into the chambers of his mind. Destruction of his enemy by pouring molten lead into his eyes, or branding him vocally as a pig, were far more enticing. But for the moment Ling Foo Gow was content to hold his peace and keep his body intact.

With an alert glance that swept from one funnel of the dim passageway to the other, the half caste slung the unconscious body over his broad shoulder and started at a rapid pace for the doorway from whence he had emerged. He had covered but half the short distance when the uniformed figure of Big Dan Kelsey, patrolman, Chinatown Squad, silhouetted its six-foot frame in the oblong of yellow that marked Jackson Street.

Evidently Mell Wing's abruptly subdued scream had reached the patrolman's ears, for he advanced on the run, revolver drawn.

"Stop!" he commanded, halting Bull Lung's disappearing act with a leveling of his weapon. "Stop in the name of the law—and make it damn quick!"

Reluctantly the half caste obeyed the command and lowered the limp body to the cobblestones. Big Dan Kelsey advanced till they were hardly a yard apart. With a flashlight, hurriedly procured, he illuminated the scene with a stream of light so bright that Ling Foo Gow crouched deeper in his nest of shadows.

"What's the grand idea?" he demanded. "Trying to pull a kidnapping? Or is it murder?"

"Kidnapping, hell!" Bull Lung loudly replied, recovering quickly from the shock of his disrupted success. "She's my wedded wife an' I caught her sneakin' out with another gink—a yellow-belly Chink at that. Just bringin' her home, that's all."

"A cow could lie better than that, Bull Lung," the patrolman advised. "Don't kid me. I know your record and that

pan of yours too well and too long to be bluffed by a wife gag. You're under arrest for—well, never mind, we'll learn the charge soon enough, I guess."

"Can you drive a Stutz?" The half caste literally shot the question.

"I can, but when I do, it'll not be a gift from you. And now that's the second charge against you—attempting to bribe an officer."

"Have a heart, Kelsey. She's my real wife, I tell you. We were married at St. Mary's over a week ago. If you'll be reasonable and let me haul her home now, I swear to God I'll show up at Central Station in the mornin' with my license and certificate. How's that?"

"It don't go with me, Bull," came the firm reply. "And besides," (the bright glare of the flashlight shone on Mell Wing's immobile features), "I recognize her. She's Hop Wing's kid—the Manchu antique dealer on the Sacramento Street crossing. You just be a nice little boy and load her in your arms, Bull; we're starting peaceful and swift for Headquarters."

Now, Big Dan Kelsey had been a member of that famous organization, the San Francisco Chinatown Police Squad, long enough to know better than trust even slightly so notorious a gangster as Bull Lung. But for some unaccountable reason he permitted his gaze to rest briefly on the pale features of the youthful captive, when it most assuredly should have been riveted intensely on his prisoner—and the brief discrepancy in his customary conduct cost him dearly, for Big Dan Kelsey paid the price for his error with his life.

As he bent over the girl, the half caste took advantage of the opportunity and shot from the hip—the automatic blazed from his jacket pocket, the skillful fingers jerked the trigger from the outside, and all five charges found



their mark in the pit of the patrolman's stomach. With a slobbering gasp, he lunged headlong to the cobblestones and there lay silent and motionless in a pool of crimson that poured from his jagged wound.

Ling Foo Gow failed to stir from his tense poise in the bank of darkness until his foe, with the limp bundle of flesh in his arms, had swiftly disappeared behind the doorway barrier. Then he gathered his emotions together, cast a single glance at the huddle of blue that lay lifeless on the cobblestones, and beat a rapid retreat to Jackson Street, where without hesitation he proceeded to Fish Alley and gained that notorious twelve-foot thoroughfare just two minutes in advance of the spreading news of the murder. Chinamen invented an equal to the radio in the days of Confucius, 500 B. C., and they have never forgotten how to use it.

Unable to reason or function his mental resources properly, the peddler of lychee nuts dived down an inconspicuous slope of steep asphalt steps and hurriedly progressed forward in a damp odorous tunnel until a gate-like frame of iron bars prevented further passage. An oval panel in the side of a nearby cement wall slid cautiously open and revealed the peering countenance of a kinsman. Then there became audible the groan of a metal cross-bar being removed and the clicks of many keys in many locks. Presently a thick door behind the iron frame opened, after which the barrier of bars itself swung on rusty hinges, and Ling Foo Gow shuffled with a sigh of relief into the forbidden realms of Yen Chow's Palace of Dreams—the Seventh Heaven of his delight.

With a few convincing pantomimic gestures, and many more silver dollars, which spoke for themselves without the aid of illustrations, Ling Foo Gow established himself quite comfortably in a shaded compartment on the third tier of

bunks, which rose one on top the other, six high, from the dirt floor to a ceiling of interwoven bamboo. After unfastening his tunic lace and removing his jacket, he placed the wooden suey-pow in position for his head, and lay sideways, resting on a doubled elbow. The atmosphere about him hung heavy with pungent odors and the few lights were subdued by thick shades of painted paper, which had the soothing effect of calming Ling Foo Gow's tumbling emotions, for he loved dearly, passionately, this Palace of Dreams (and nightmares, too) with the inherited lust that only the yellow-man knows for the so-called vice of his ancestors.

From a lampless hallway a hollow cheeked attendant shuffled to his bunk and placed the necessary implements and ingredients in their respective positions, to-wit: a small brass taper from which darted a scarlet tongue of cooking flame, a slender bamboo pipe with ivory bowl, a yen-hok the length of a hatpin, a recently cleansed ge-rag, a tong-like yen-she-gow for handling the valuable compound, and three black pills of fresh opium, each rolled to the size and shape of a garden pea.

When the attendant had bowed and drawn together the burlap curtains that draped from the frame of the bunk, the peddler of nuts went about the intricate business of preparing his voyage to the land of illusion with the inbred skill that Occidentals have found difficult to mimic.

To us, hop is the vile habit of a degenerate—to the gentleman from China it is a glorious diversion of the honorable. We of the West may crave the pill when a habit has developed—but we never may, like the true Oriental, love it. To him, daily life is his hell—opium his Heaven. Perhaps we err in taking it from him? But then again, he should not rebel. He came to our shores by his own volition—when in America do as Americans do. But let us return to Ling Foo Gow who evidently disagrees with our solution.



Dexterous fingers applied to the ivory bowl of the slender pipe polished it until the ge-rag was soiled to a tobacco brown. Then Ling Foo Gow set it carefully aside and raised the moist pills to his nostrils, one by one, and with much sniffing satisfied himself as to the quality of his purchase. After that he forked a single pill with his yen-hok and poised it over the cooking flame. Presently thick gray fumes rose and lay immobile in the foul air. Experience coupled with instinct told him the pill was sufficiently baked, so with a swift balancing movement of the yen-hok, he inserted it perfectly in the bowl of the pipe. With the sinking of his head in the wooden curve of the suey-pow, he drew three deep breaths on the reed mouthpiece of the pipe. After that the lids sagged over his jet eyes and life assumed magnificently exaggerated proportions for the humble peddler of lychee nuts.

In the third bunk above, the glow of a taper brightened. A rasping voice burst into tuneless wail:

*A hop-fiend went on a dead beat stroll,  
Lookin' for a pill he couldn't roll.*

*Well he walked and he talked the livelong day,  
Raving of riches he'd have to play.*

*And he finally found a friend who money had,  
Pockets full, muck boucoo.*

*So he borrowed a caser and away he flew,  
To dangle at the end of a Chink's bamboo.*

*Well he cooked and he puffed and he rolled away,  
Dreamed of billions he'd have some day.*

*And then she came, nice and fair,  
Dark blue eyes and golden hair.*

*She vamped him here and she vamped him there,  
And he rescued her, his lady fair.*

*But the end she come as she always do,  
And everything went with a great big blue.*

*The pipe went out,  
The pill was green,  
He was cookin' with a hatpin,  
'cause the yen-hok broke.  
The ge-rags were twisted,  
The pipe needed rodin,  
He was out of dope.  
So he stabs himself with  
a yen-she-gow.  
And dies with his head on  
a suey-pow.*

The voice broke off to a low whine. Gray fumes seeped from the burlap curtains. And presently Yen Chow's Palace of Dreams drifted away again in its doze of silence.

### CHAPTER III

It was the hour of awakening that verges dawn, when Ling Foo Gow shook himself from the grip of a narcotized trance, gulped a tumbler of in-gu-pai, and emerged from the Fish Alley hop joint to the street. Telegraph Hill still drowsed beneath a drapery of darkness, but in the East the preliminary rays of daylight painted the horizon with slender streaks of silver that gradually broadened. The fog had thinned to a transparent veil of pearl gray, and although it had now ceased to rain, Ling Foo Gow noted by the tiny puddles that formed between the cobblestones that it had rained during his slumber. A chilly wind blew in from the Pacific and fluttered noisily the exotic banners and paper lanterns that hung from the doorways of bazaars. The Grant Avenue lane was practically deserted, the peddler of nuts discovered as he turned from Jackson Street and descended to the narrow thoroughfare. Although he kept an alert watch, it was not until he reached the base of the incline at Bush Street, that Ling Foo Gow found the object he desired more than anything else in the world. And then for a moment he hesitated, not knowing whether he wanted it or not.

For almost five hours Captain Dennison of the Chinatown Squad and Detective Sergeant Weston of Central Station, had continued incessantly on a thorough and diligent search for probable clues that would reveal the identity of the slayer of Patrolman Kelsey. From every possible angle they had worked, and not a single thread of evidence had they uncovered, nor even arrived at an imaginary solution of the baffling problem the crime presented. As was the usual case, Chinatown had swallowed clues, motive and murder.

"I tell you Captain," the Detective Sergeant was speaking, "it's no use. They laid for him and they got him. It's like hunting for something where there's nothing. I suggest we call a halt, an' start over again later on. I'm about all in—and, anyway, we've done all we can do as it is. What say?"

"I guess you're right, Weston," the Captain replied after a weary yawn, "though I hate like the devil to see these Chinks get away with anything. Kelsey was one of my best men—an old timer—and I liked him. But then, you're right about hitting it again in a few hours—it's useless now. We might as well be going, eh?"

Depressed by their failure and weary from exertion, the officers stepped from the shadows of the doorway where they had conversed, and retraced their steps through the fringe of the district toward Headquarters. And it was then that Ling Foo Gow caught the glitter of the silver police badge on Captain Dennison's breast and so found the object he desired.

To the day of their respective deaths, the two officers will not forget the remarkable incident that occurred in the gray light of that chilly dawn.

From apparently nowhere the figure of an aged Oriental suddenly leaped and barred their passage. Without a sound the strange creature fixed their attention and serious interest by pointing his forefinger in the shape of a pistol and shoving it five times to the pit of Captain Dennison's stomach. Patrolman Kelsey had been shot five times in the pit of his stomach—the recollection came to the officers instantly. But before their astonishment had calmed and they were able to speak, the Oriental moulded his hands to the shape of glasses and raised them to his sparkling eyes, signifying the fact that he had seen. Then, twisting his lips in a vain attempt to speak, he conveyed his muteness. The remainder came easy.



With frenzied pantomimic gestures he repeated his actions and pointed up the slope toward the scene of the crime until he was satisfied he was understood. Then he abruptly turned and retraced his steps toward Jackson Street. To say the least, the officers followed.

As he neared the destination, the blood seemed to vanish from the veins of his yellow face, for it was void of any color, save a pale, chalkish tint. His small eyes bulged watery in their slanting sockets and showed red at the rims. Froth, a nauseating spume, came from his mouth, and with it the usual trembling. Ling Foo Gow faced his crisis.

Many times many persons have told us about a Chinaman never displaying his genuine emotions. Many times many persons have been grossly misinformed. In this particular action, Ling Foo Gow was *not* an exception—he had merely lowered the frail mask because he could hold it no longer. Fear had conquered breeding.

And so, as has been mentioned, Ling Foo Gow 'dropped the expressionless mask of his race, and gave vent to his real emotions in the same manner as would the most honorable of his august kinsmen.

It was a matter of ten minutes' brisk walk to the passageway that marked the scene of the murder. The peddler of nuts led the way without so much as a single backward glance to verify his unproven belief that the officers followed. He knew it to be unnecessary and it surely was, for both Captain Dennison and Detective Sergeant Weston were capable of recognizing a so-called hot trail when they crossed one and the vivid portrayal they had recently witnessed, convinced them of the Oriental's sincerity. That he was leading them to something definitely connected with the slaying of Big Dan Kelsey, they were positive, but just what, went as an unanswered question. But then the experienced know the futility of guessing about Chinatown.

As the officers trailed the swift figure of Ling Foo Gow up unpaved slopes, through dark alleyways and finally reached the dim passageway, they exchanged the brief comments that were necessary in hushed voices and the eagerness to avenge the death of their brother officer shone plainly in the set lines of their features. Nothing will spur men to duty as the killing of a comrade—the Captain and his aide were obvious corroboration.

Motioning toward the spot in the shadows where he had beheld the tragedy, Ling Foo Gow conveyed his desire to the officers that they stand where he had stood and watch as he had watched. It was a moment before they grasped his meaning but when they at last did, their compliance came without question. Ling Foo Gow was incapable of realizing that the right hands of both Captain and Sergeant clutched the grips of bull-nosed revolvers in their harmless appearing pockets. And anyway, he would not have minded had he known. The fact that one of the pair wore the blue uniform of the Foreign Devils and the badge of authority, was enough for him. They were the powerful gentlemen who clubbed the drunken sailors and took them away in a red carriage and were most always successful in placing the scoundrels somewhere out of sight—and that satisfied his desires. Somehow he had vaguely supposed these mighty monarchs of the streets to be a sort of foreign god, created especially to protect the innocent and drive away evil spirits. It had amazed him frightfully to discover they were susceptible to death; he imagined them immune from everything harmful. And actually, the crumbling of this false theory had been as important a factor in prompting his visit to Yen Chow's Palace of Dreams, as had the victory of his foe over the female who brought him happiness. The two blows descending simultaneously had indeed shattered his emotions.

Only one action remained for Ling Foo Gow now—that



was to conclude this necessary duty as quickly and as convincingly as possible, and he went about this strange finale with the master strokes of a genius. It was his one and only performance, and forever will it live in the annals of San Francisco police history. The witnessing officers who stood dumfounded in the shadows, their eyes bulging, their thoughts racing, have told the story a thousand times, and never will it grow old.

As Captain Dennison always declared: "It was the first three minutes of life in a dead man's existence. For years that Chink hung around the colony doing nothing, good or bad. He ate and he slept and he suffered—just a useless bit of harmless flesh and blood. And then—as Weston and me stood there watchin'—spirit just oozed from that hulk of yellow, and life for that dumb Chink really began."

And in the words of this narrative, here is what occurred:

Ling Foo Gow folded his arms across his sunken chest in the manner of an Oriental female, and shuffled with tiny steps down the passageway, as had Mell Wing less than six hours previously. Then he retreated swiftly to the doorway where Bull Lung had made his abrupt appearance, and mimicked the half caste's actions to absolute perfection. By gestures he portrayed each move of the encounter and struggle between the two, and the brutal strangling of Mell Wing. Then, after he had slung the imaginary body over his shoulder and started for the doorway at a rapid pace, he darted from the characterization to the Jackson Street funnel of the passageway and enacted the sudden appearance of patrolman Kelsey. Then, leaping from one role to the other, he repeated each detail of the arrest and concluded his performance by displaying the cold blooded manner of the patrolman's murder, and falling headlong to the cobblestones as the officer had fallen.

Standing there unable to move or speak, as they realized Ling Foo Gow had stood, both Captain and Sergeant were

of the same mind. The details of the killing were as clear as if they had beheld the tragedy themselves. It seemed to them as though they sat before the footlights in some exotic theater, and applauded the grotesque acting of a great pantomimist. The Captain was the first to recover.

"God!" he exclaimed, his fingers clutching the sleeve of his aide's jacket, moist beads of sweat forming on his brow. "It's plain, Weston, it's plain as daylight! But how, how's he gonna tell us who did it? He can't talk—"

Before the Sergeant had mustered his wits to reply, Ling Foo Gow leaped to his feet and answered the question with a beckoning gesture for them to follow. To the doorway where Bull Lung had disappeared with the unconscious female in his arms, he led them. Then he pointed to the iron latch on the frame barrier and nodded his head. A smile (or was it a grin?) came to his poppy hued features and curled his lips. His jet eyes twinkled. The trembling of his body ceased. Gradually, as plain as the waters flooding a dry basin, the natural tint returned to his hollow cheeks. The Seventh Heaven of Delight was close at hand.

Ling Foo Gow had conquered.

## CHAPTER IV

Long previous to the arrival of a detail of reserves from Headquarters, and of the vicinity awakening to the annoying fact that it was surrounded by a circle of Foreign Devils with sawed-off shotguns, the peddler of lychee nuts had executed an inconspicuous disappearance from the quarter. No one had seen him go, nor could anyone recall his final appearance. He had simply vanished, and the matter rested there.

Captain Dennison, followed by a squad of plain-clothes officers who were quite dexterous in affairs of the sort, led the raid into the private chambers of Bull Lung's illicit gaming establishment. And really, it was all very simple and peaceful. The thick door with its many locks splintered under the shock of a raiding ax, and into a stuffy gas lit hallway the officers advanced.

There, hardly a dozen paces from the passageway, they found him, or rather his cold slimy body, for the official report stated that Bull Lung had been dead almost six hours. And then, when his lifeless carcass had been dragged to light, a brief search revealed Mell Wing locked behind the walls of an adjoining cell—gagged securely and frightened immensely, but otherwise uninjured.

Both of San Francisco's morning newspapers in their sensational reports of the tragedy, the rescue of the imprisoned girl, and the discovery of the dead body of the murderer, gave detailed space to the extraordinary fact that Bull Lung had died of heart failure while fleeing horror stricken from the scene of his crime. He had been brought to justice by the Almighty Judge, they said, and most everyone who read the events preceding his death, agreed and felt that

the State had been graciously relieved of the expense of trial and conviction.

In the articles Ling Foo Gow was mentioned very briefly, but had he been acquainted with newspapers he could have denied the statement that Bull Lung died of heart failure—for it was altogether false. And had the coroner ordered an investigation of the murderer's visceral cavity, the proof would have been discovered, but he did not bother, and it has so occurred that even to this day Ling Foo Gow alone knows the secret.

For had not he, himself, injected poison into a handful of lychee nuts and placed them close to the rim of his basket where, following his nightly habit, Bull Lung's thieving hand had grasped them that evening of the murder when he spat full in the face of Ling Foo Gow? Certainly he had, and his inability to speak was the only barrier that prevented him from openly boasting.

For Ling Foo Gow possessed one trait of a perfectly balanced mind—he was extremely proud of his illustrious achievement and throughout his entire life of many years the acute ecstasy which came with this triumph, remained the most exquisite sensation he had known.





# THE SCARLET LADDER





# THE SCARLET LADDER

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## CHAPTER I

From over the curve of the earth came dawn, gray and mean, to the coral shores of Samolo. The arrogant blue of the Pacific tore over the reef in billows of white-caps and shot up the washed sand of the beach a cold, quivering sheet of silver. The tall, slender palms that rose from the jungle edge at Two-Pence Point swayed in the cool breeze like huge sentinels staggering from drink. The bamboo flaps that hung from the veranda of the commissary swung shut one by one as gusts of wind shivered the frail structure. Dark skinned natives scampered in and out of the copra shanties, carrying perishable commodities and pausing occasionally to cast suspicious glances upward at the dull menacing sky. Samolo was on the verge of experiencing one of its notorious tropical storms—according to all indications, human and elemental.

Ralph Weston was awakened by the light, preliminary drops which foretold the torrent that was to ensue. Blinking his dark eyes, he brushed the sand from his face and rose to a sitting position. His mouth was dry and stenchy; about him the air was permeated with a foul odor of bad liquor; his eyes were bloodshot and blurred in their watery sockets; a five days' growth of beard lent his usually clean-cut features an ugly expression; he glanced downward at the one time cream flannel of his fashionable tropic suit and grinned. The cloth was a hopeless mass of cheroot stains and whiskey blotches. His collar was missing, as was his tie. The lace had broken in one of his mud splattered shoes. For a moment he stared at what had once been a white-kid

surface. Then he scraped his hands about in the sand and located a square-necked bottle. Gordon gin—it was empty.

Something stirred behind him. He turned quickly. It was the huge nigger. Oh, yes, he remembered now! Big Bimbo they had called him—a West Coast Black, bulging with muscles and strength. Let's see, what had happened? It was vague, the recollection, but gradually it came back, scene by scene.

He had gone to the Casino sober, he thought—but wasn't positive (nothing seemed to be positive with him these days). But that mattered little. He had gone there, that was enough. And the place was crowded, too—jammed to overflowing: dancing hulas, sailors, dock laborers, a few Orientals, Spaniards and Latins, the usual British contingent, and himself—a Yank (God!—what a disgrace to his country).

He had sat alone in one of the bamboo booths. He had ordered—and an oily Kanaka had served him with gin and rum, gin and rum, with an occasional whiskey to break the monotony. The lights had grown dim; the reed music boisterous. The crowds, the heterogeneous throngs, that circled the roulette games, had blurred to his vision. He was drunk—again was it?—or yet?

A girl, a youthful thing with olive skin, honey cheeks, and a delicious red mouth, had smiled and sat beside him. She had patted his hand, winked her jet eyes—and he had ordered.

Suddenly a very embarrassing predicament arose. The Kanaka waiter shoved him a staggering bill. A diligent search through his pockets revealed a copper—and that was all. He turned to his new found acquaintance and grinned—but she had disappeared (with his wallet, he wondered—no, he was broke, flat broke). He signed the bill and handed it to the bewildered Kanaka. Obviously such a

mode of credit was unknown. The waiter, jabbering volubly, made his way to the bar, and very abruptly the proprietor—Gus LeVene, they had called him—appeared. He exchanged whispered words with the Kanaka—and the waiter disappeared in the smoke clouded hall. Then he demanded cash. The Kanaka reappeared presently with the girl, and the proprietor accused her of deliberately drinking with a penniless customer. She offered to pay the bill. Gus LeVene grabbed a handful of silver from her and shoved her away. Then he pointed an angry finger in the direction of Ralph Weston—and received a smashing upper-cut on his flabby jaw.

The remainder of the encounter was very vague. It seemed as though he had been thrown out in the shallow gutter. Big Bimbo, always broke and always begging drinks, had followed him, landing in the mud headlong. The West Coast negro had clung fiercely to a bottle of gin. They must have drunk it, every drop. And now here they were, side by side, on the beach.

Ralph rose to his unsteady feet and dropped the square-necked bottle. It landed on the Black. He opened his eyes and almost instantly fixed them on the gray sky.

"Mornin'," he growled. "Better be makin' for shelter. Storm—rain. Big much come quick."

"Thanks," Ralph replied, yawning. "Guess I'll hit for the Casino and have breakfast. Come along?"

"Breakfast, hell!" came the answer. "You're broke—an' so am I. You're cause for me bein' kicked out by Gus last night. You no pay bill—out you go. Gus mad as devil—'e take it out on me. I got no cash—not a sou. Out I go with bottle of gin. Where gin go, you thief?"

The huge black shifted his small pin-point eyes until they rested on the empty bottle. Ralph did not reply. He had thought the gentleman from the West Coast his friend—he



had imagined they were both in the same boat. Evidently he was mistaken.

"Last night I was too drunk to fight," growled Big Bimbo, kicking the bottle surfward and scowling at Ralph. "You steal me gin when I sleep. You no good White—low below good Black like me. Maybe I beat you like copra dust, like man beat native thief. You worse rat pirate."

Ralph had been too dazed to recall whether or not he had consumed the liquor in question. Big Bimbo's anger was growing as the mantle of slumber cleared from his mind, that Ralph realized, and also that he was no match in a fistic encounter with the muscle-bulging African. He squirmed and forced a smile.

"Aw, we're good pals, Bimbo," he managed to say. "I must have emptied the bottle, but I'll pay you. I'm good—you'll get your money."

"Me get nothin'. You broke. No can pay bill to Gus. Not a sou. You like all men come to Samolo. Much silver an' five-pound notes. Much drink gin, rum. Quick go silver. Quick go five-pound notes. Purty soon broke—like you. No good White—beg coppers, starve, steal. Purty soon jump from Two-Pence Point an' die. Maybe go deep in jungle an' no come back. I know you kind—plenty like you come to Samolo. No good—die."

"See here, Bimbo, you can't talk to me that way. I'm not one of the derelicts that die out here at the end of the world. I'm just as——"

But the Black with a sneer of loathing turned his back on Ralph and strode toward the row of low shanties that spread out on each side of the commissary in irregular streets. A gust of wind, followed by heavy drops of rain, struck Ralph and his words of protest died in his throat. Big Bimbo, his last friend, had turned against him like all the rest. It was a pathetic figure in a suit of spattered flannel that staggered up the beach.

The huge negro had reached the narrow passageway between Gus LeVene's Casino and the British Canteen before Ralph caught up with him. It was going damn low, he realized, to beg for the friendship of a worthless Black, but then a friend is a friend, and he had lost in the last month all race distinction.

"Just a moment, Bimbo," he called. "I'll get some money and pay for your gin. No use being sore. I'm sorry. I was drunk and didn't realize it was the last drop."

"That's what they all talk. All the no good Whites that come to Samolo. I do, I get, I give—that what they say. They get dead—that's what they get. Just what you get when you starve and no can beg! Quick beat it or I'll smash in you no good head!"

The deprivation of his much desired eye-opener had obviously attained, in the negro's mind, to a monstrous crime. Ralph realized this and was about to retreat when an object directly below a window on the Casino side of the narrow passageway caught his gaze. For a moment he stared in silence. Then he stooped and snatched it from a crevice in the cobblestones. A single glance told him it was a wallet—a thick roll of British bank notes of high denomination protruded from the pigskin folds.

It was tucked away in a side pocket by the time Bimbo reached him. The African's beady eyes bulged. A snarl curved his thick lips. His chest swelled as he caught Ralph's jacket in the grasp of his massive hand.

"Give me that cash quick!" he demanded, shaking Ralph with angry jerks. "Give to me or I'll kill you."

"I'll pay you what I owe for the gin," Ralph managed to stutter. "But I found the wallet—it's mine until the owner proves his right to it."

Big Bimbo did not answer. With a lightning swing of his doubled fist the slender Ralph fell to the cobblestones.

A tiny stream of scarlet blood oozed from his jaw where the fist struck. He crouched without protest on his hands and knees as the huge Black tore the wallet from his pocket and shoved it away in his shirt. Then a booted foot crashed against his ribs, and the African strode haughtily down the passageway, a snickering grin twisting the lines of his ebony countenance.

With a mighty peal of thunder the storm broke, and Ralph lay motionless for a moment as the torrent of rain soaked his clothes. Then something vital snapped within him—he knew not what. In an instant he was himself again—the Ralph Weston of days far, far in the past. He had reached the bottom of his ladder, the lowest pit of his abyss. It all came to him in a flash—he saw, realized just what he really was, just how others saw him. A nigger had beaten him and cast him aside—the sickening thought pounded incessantly through his mind. He was penniless, stranded, a derelict thrown up like a bit of jetsam on the shores of a far-off island, and now his last chance was gone. Bimbo, the African, had dealt the final blow. Bimbo, the beggar, the petty thief of Samolo, had shattered his last chance, and mastered him like a helpless toy.

Then Ralph found himself running. Running as he never had before. He overtook the Black on the broad veranda of the Casino. He was talking with Gus LeVene, the proprietor who had thrown them both out the night previous. He was reaching in his shirt for the wallet, apparently to pay his long over-due bill, and set himself right with the rat-like Gus.

Then Ralph reached the scene and grabbed him by his open collar and swung him off the veranda into a puddle of fresh mud that had quickly formed from the pouring torrent. Bimbo was taken entirely off his guard. But he was a brute of strength and in an instant he regained his



feet. Ralph faced him squarely, his fists clenched, a wild gleam in his dark eyes.

"I want that wallet of money you stole from me!" he demanded. "And I want it now! Hand it over you black thief or I'll pound you into the ground! Be quick!"

"I got no money belong to you! You broke—no good white dog," Bimbo snarled. "Beat it!"

He made a vicious lunge at the boy's face and left the marks of his nails thereon in bloody streaks. For a second the suddenness of the attack stunned Ralph. Then he uttered a mad cry and dashed with swinging fists at his huge rival.

The fistic encounter that ensued will never be forgotten by the villagers of Samolo who beheld the undeniable triumph that stormy morning of a white derelict over a black twice his size. In fifteen minutes Big Bimbo lay flat on his back in the mud puddle. His nose was broken. Both eyes were swollen shut. A nasty cut dripped blood from his cheek, and there was not an ounce of fight left in him. He was beaten, beaten right into the ground.

With a ripping jerk Ralph, bending over the fallen figure, tore the wallet from the black bosom. Then he stuffed it away in an inner pocket and faced the throng of perhaps fifty people that had beheld the affray. They were an unhomogeneous lot, the gathering that circled him. Arabs from the back desert, Egyptians, a scattering of Orientals, importers and traders from France and Italy, here and there a Dutch sailor or Spanish merchantman, the usual contingent of British remittance men, and every sort of natives from oily Kanakas to dark Samoans—the typical population of Samolo, that far-off port where junks from Kwangchow with cargoes of sandalwood, topsail schooners with spices from the South Coast, freighters heavy with Chinese silks and Egyptian rugs, passenger liners with importation heads

and globe-trotters, war craft from every nation, and tramps from everywhere loaded with ironwood and slop merchandise, drop their anchors between the coral breakwaters and coal their stomachs from the high heaps that line the docks.

Ralph had fought squarely and as he faced the throng that circled him, he knew the audience for the most part favored him. Gus LeVene was plainly one of the opposite faction. A mean frown creased his brow. And then as he scanned their faces with a circling glance, Ralph saw there were others that favored the beaten Bimbo.

"I've got something to say to all of you!" he cried to the crowd in general. "But particularly to you, Gus LeVene, and your dirty henchmen. I came here to Samolo a month ago, and I came with money, cash and plenty of it. I spent freely, and the most of it went for gin and rum in your Casino, Gus. You drank with me, and I paid. So did your friends. I see 'em standing about you now. I fed 'em, and I poured 'em drink after drink. A week ago I found myself with little money, and I tried to go slow on expenses. Your friends, Gus, the men I met through you, the jelly-fish I mistook for my companions, what did they do when they saw I was going broke after spending my coin on them? You know what they did! They passed me up as though they never had seen me before. When I sat at their tables, they got up and left. They boycotted me, and so did you! You threw me out to sleep in a gutter—I, who have spent hundreds in your Casino for your rotten liquor; I, who played the good fellow.

"Well, Gus, I've got money again, but I've changed. I hit the bottom of my ladder when I let a negro run over me, and now I'm climbing back! All hell won't stop me, and by the gods, you'll respect me, Gus, you and your dirty henchmen! From now on I'm Mr. Ralph Weston of the United States of America, and if there's anybody here



who wants to dispute my right to recognition as a gentleman—anybody that's not going to respect me—let him or them step forward!"

A dead silence held the throng. Gus shifted his eyes uneasily and chewed furiously on the fat cheroot that protruded from his lips. Then he grunted something inaudible and strode up the steps to the veranda and through the swinging portals to his Casino. His gang of henchmen followed his lead, one by one. And presently Ralph found himself standing alone in the torrent of rain. Bimbo lay at his feet motionless, bleeding and unconscious. With effort Ralph dragged him out of the rain to the veranda. Then he abruptly turned on his heels and strode down the narrow shack-sided lane that called itself a street.

## CHAPTER II

Ralph was hardly a dozen paces away from the portals of Gus LeVene's Casino, when a short, slender man with iron-gray hair and a weather beaten face emerged from the structure and followed swiftly in his wake. He was perhaps sixty-five, this frail man, and his garments plainly stamped him as of the sea. A pea-jacket of blue serge, with large brass buttons down the front, a merchantman cap of similar material with gilt lettering, "Captain," inscribed on the band, and a black flowing cravat, were conspicuous in their neatness on his figure. He caught up with Ralph at the landing of the first coal dock. Ralph had paused to light a cigarette under the balcony of a wharf warehouse.

"Just a moment there, Weston!" the old man cried. "I want to have a word with you."

He advanced and offered his hand. Ralph, puzzled at the strange interruption, glanced at the lettering on the stranger's cap, and accepted the hand. He remembered seeing the Captain in the throng that had circled him during the fight, and also he recognized the aged seaman as a frequent habitue of Gus' Casino.

"I'm William Nelson," he said, shaking Ralph's hand. "Captain Nelson of the 'Blue Gull.' Independent freighter—silks and merchandise from China to Sydney and 'Frisco. I saw your fight. Congratulations, Mr. Weston—you're a real Yankee. There's not many from the States here in Samolo, but you can bet we're proud of you. I'm from Portland, myself."

"I'm very glad to know you, Captain Nelson. I fear though, my appearance and conduct is not much of an honor——" but the Captain cut him short.

"Bosh—don't get that idea in your head, son. You were gallant," he declared. "And if you'll accept, you're my guest on the 'Blue Gull.' She's docked down the lane here at number six. And, anyway," he added, pointing out his ship, "I want to have a business chat. Will you come?"

Without waiting for a reply he shoved his arm in Ralph's and kept up a constant chatter as they neared the sixth dock. When they had mounted the gang-plank and entered a small but very neat and orderly forward-cabin, he motioned Ralph to a chair and opened a box of choice cigars. Ralph declined and lit one of his own cigarettes. Outside through a port-hole the storm was increasing its fury. Not until he had taken several puffs from his cigar did the Captain speak. Then a queer twinkle came into his eyes, which were intensely blue and slightly bulging, and a broad grin creased his face.

"How old are you, Mr. Weston?" he casually inquired, scrutinizing Ralph from head to foot. "That is," he added, "if you don't mind an old man's curiosity."

"I'm twenty-six," came the answer.

"Like gin and rum, don't you?"

"I guess I've had my share, Captain."

"'Bout gone the limit, ain't you?"

"Past the limit, but I think you heard what I told that gang in front of the Casino, and, Captain, I meant it, every word!"

"Ever swore off liquor before, son?"

"A dozen times, but this time I'm through. I never realized until this last week just how low I'd gone. This morning I hit the bottom of my ladder; now I'm climbing back!"

"Glad to hear it, son, but I don't believe it. You think you've had enough, but now that you've got that wallet full of coin, you won't desist, you won't be able to resist, doing just what you did before when you had money."

"Sir, I think I can handle my affairs without interference. I came here as your guest, not to receive a lecture. In fact, you fairly forced me to come aboard. Now if you'll excuse me, I'll be going. Good-day."

Ralph rose to his feet and crossed to the door they had entered. He tried the brass knob. It was locked. Quickly he turned about and faced the Captain, a bewildered expression on his countenance. At first he had taken the Captain's rather personal inquiries as nothing more than the curiosity of age for youth; now he was angry. He had not eaten or bathed. Blood clotted in his hair and had dried on his face. He was exhausted from the fight, and now he faced a new predicament.

The aged Captain held an ugly revolver in the grasp of a firm hand. He remained seated, but a determined gleam had come into his deep, blue eyes.

"Sit down, Weston," he commanded, "or I'll be forced to shoot you." It was obvious that he meant what he said.

With a shrug of his shoulders Ralph obediently complied.

"What does this mean?" he demanded. "Robbery—or what?"

"It means," the Captain answered, "that you, Ralph Weston, are shanghaied. I've wanted to find a chap like you for five years, and now, thank God, I have. I've watched you here at Samolo for a month. I've seen you drop lower and lower, till even the dirty Casino hounds laughed in your face, till they refused your drunken company. And I've selected you for an experiment—selected you as the lowest, the filthiest morsel of young manhood on the Pacific. For five years I've hunted in every port from Port Said to Ceylon to find a chap like you. And now that I've got you I'm gonna keep you till my experiment has broke or made good. You're shanghaied, Weston, shanghaied and all



hell can't get you off this ship. As long as you obey me as your Captain you'll fare well, but one bad move and it's chains in the hold. We sail for China after silk as soon as the storm calms. Follow me to your cabin."

For a moment Ralph was nonplused. Then he jumped up and faced his captor. Conflicting emotions were surging through him. He resented his imprisonment and wanted to fight, but he saw the futility of it. Undoubtedly the Captain had given instructions to his crew. Chained in the hold of a freighter on a stormy sea held few merits, and this Ralph realized.

"For the time being I will obey your commands," he said. "But perhaps you'll not always be in the position you now hold. I consider myself a prisoner in the hands of a pirate or maniac, I don't know which."

"You'll soon find out," came the answer. "And by the way, Weston," apparently a new thought had come to the Captain, "I want that wallet I saw you take from the nigger. It's in your inner pocket; you'll not need it for a few months. So hand it over, or shall I have it taken from you?"

"You'll have to take it! I found it and until its owner proves his right, it's mine. I refuse to surrender it!"

The Captain jerked a cord that hung from a loop-hole nearby. The revolver still reposed in his grip. Presently a door on the far side of the cabin opened and a young girl paused in the oblong frame. She could not have been more than eighteen at the most, Ralph guessed as he stared at her in surprise, and that she was the most beautiful creature he had ever beheld, he knew.

Her hair and eyes were dark like his own—the first hung over her shoulders in long smooth waves, the latter sparkled in almond shaped rims with a fringe of long dark lashes shading them. She was small and slender, but her curves gave promise. Her predominating feature was a red

mouth, the color of clear wine when held to the light. It was so perfect, so delicately curved, that Ralph could hardly take his gaze from it. The Captain's words roused him.

"Daughter," he said, nodding his gray head toward Ralph, "this man has my wallet in his inner jacket pocket. Please get it for me—he refuses to hand it over."

"All right, father," came the girl's reply. "Keep your gun on him."

She advanced to Ralph and jerked open his jacket. Her slender hand darted into his pocket and emerged with the wallet. Ralph held his silence as long as he could, then he blurted out his genuine feelings.

"So you're just like your father," he said. "Both robbers. Well, take the wallet, and I hope to heaven it gives you pleasure to work together in your stealings."

The Captain grinned in enjoyment. But not so with her. In an instant she had slapped Ralph across the face with the palm of her hand, and loathing burned in her dark eyes.

"Apologize!" she demanded. "Apologize this minute or I'll shoot you if father doesn't."

"Under the unfair circumstances, I apologize," Ralph said, with a condescending bow. "I hope you're satisfied."

"No, I'm not satisfied," flared the reply. "And how dare you claim this wallet? My father has carried it as long as I can remember." She jerked it open and turned back the pigskin flap. "Here is his name—printed right in the leather. Now I guess you'll admit who's the thief!"

Ralph stared bewildered at the gilt lettering. It read: "Captain William Nelson—Blue Gull—Portland, U. S. A." Unable to understand he remained silent, and gave it up with an uncomprehending sigh. After all his months of drunken idleness in the Pacific, things were occurring quite rapidly for him of a sudden. But why? Was it because of his oath to reform, to come back? Or was it just fate?

The Captain laughed aloud and beckoned the girl to his side. She handed him the wallet and smiled.

"I'm sorry, father," she declared, "that I became so angry in your presence. But I couldn't stand for anyone like him to call us robbers."

"That's all right, Loma. You did what you thought best. You may go now, dear. I'll tend to our guest."

With an angry glance at Ralph, the girl left the room, closing the door with a decided bang. The Captain opened the wallet and removed the fat roll of British Bank notes. He slipped off the rubber band that circled the wad and removed the top note. It was marked fifty pounds—beneath it was a wad of worthless paper cut in the shape of currency. Ralph's eyes bulged in their sockets as he stared at the revelation. Fifty pounds wrapped about a wad of worthless paper—what did it mean? He had expected the roll to contain a thousand pounds at least.

"I didn't intend to tell you just yet, Weston," the Captain was speaking. "But now's as good a time as any." He motioned Ralph to a chair and seated himself. The revolver lay nearby on the ledge of a table. Ralph complied and sat down.

"It's necessary in my little experiment," he went on, "to find somebody like yourself. Somebody that's gone about as low as humans go—that's reached the bottom. And that somebody must be young—you're just the right age—twenty-six you said. And besides, that somebody must have guts. Guts to stand up and fight—like you did this mornin'. You fill all the requirements, every one. You're a drunkard, you're a worthless idler, you're young, and with all your weak faults—do you get that?—w - e - a - k faults—you're willin' to scrap; you've got guts. I give you that much credit—but that's all. You don't deserve an ounce more.



"When I first set my lamps on you was one night at Gus'. For five years I've been hanging around such dumps hoping against hope that I'd find such a wreck as you. And when first I saw you dead drunk at a table with a gang of dirty cut-throats, I knew you were the young chap I'd been lookin' for. Something seemed to tell me—that was a month ago, and since then I've watched you night and day. I've seen you come and go from Ah Gow's hop dive on the waterfront. I've watched you drink with low women in the Casino whose very faces displayed the penalty of their vile trade. I've seen you go lower and lower—do things that would sicken a real man. So, Weston, I knew you were my man, the lowest man of your age in all the Pacific ports—and I set my trap for you. I wanted to find out if you had guts. For three days I've tried to drop my wallet where you'd have to fight for it. This mornin' I got a chance, and Weston you fought. You've got guts, but that's about all. You're a perfect specimen for my experiment, as perfect as I could ever find.

"And now I'm gonna lay down the law to you. You'll obey or I'll chain you and I'll have you horse whipped till you can't even speak. It'll be a month before we see land again, and during that period you're gonna drink more rum and gin and whiskey than you ever saw in all your life before. But you'll not even smell hop—opium and you are strangers—get that?

"I don't care a whoop what made you into the wreck you are—women or too much money, I suppose—but that's what you are, a human wreck, and from now on you're my specimen—to do what I want with. If you fight you'll lose, I've seen to that. And the easier you take it, the better you'll fare. Now get up and do as I tell you."

From the first word of the Captain's utterance Ralph remained silent. He realized he was in a dangerous predicament and no matter what rebellious thoughts surged



within him, he held a motionless, composed expression on his blood-streaked face and secreted his true emotions from his captor. He was at a loss to understand why and for what purpose the Captain wanted him. It was true he had gone about as low as humans go—liquor, hop and women—but what in blazes did the old seaman care if he had? Was the old Captain insane?—or what? What did he mean by his experiment? Some grotesque test? Unable to arrive at a lucid solution Ralph arose as he was commanded and preceded his captor through the cabin door and down a narrow companionway that hung heavy with an odor of dry salt, foul and pungent. Overhead brass lanterns swung as the freighter swayed in an incessant roll. The continual patter of rain drowned out even the roar of the surf that was occasionally visible through small copper-lined port holes. They reached a single door at the end of the companionway on the aft-side.

“Stop,” the Captain ordered. And when Ralph obeyed, he added: “Weston, you’ll find food and drink and a basin to wash in. You’d better get some rest—you’re all in; that nigger gave you a battle.”

Ralph opened the door and stepped in a dingy cabin. The only port hole was barred with iron lacing. A small mirror, a bunk built in the wall, and a crude stool were the only furnishings. He paused and faced the Captain who stood in the companionway, the revolver in his hand, a broad grin on his lips.

“For my part, Captain Nelson,” he growled, “you can go to hell!”

The thick door slammed in his face and the sound of a lock being snapped was plainly audible. Then he heard the Captain laugh, and Ralph gradually calmed his wrath—it was useless, he realized, useless to rebel. He was a prisoner, and escape was, to all appearances, impossible.

For a long time he sat motionless on the edge of the bunk, his head buried in the palms of his hands. Then he threw off the conflicting thoughts that throbbed in his mind and shifted his gaze to locate the aforementioned basin of wash water. He found it under the bunk, side by side with a loaf of stale bread and a jar of liquid. The basin was brim full, and it was not until he dipped his hands in it and brought them to his face, that he realized it was gin. And, furthermore, the jar contained whiskey and the stale bread had been soaked in rum and allowed to harden.

For a brief moment Ralph Weston stood dumfounded in utter amazement. Then he tried to force a smile, but it failed miserably. His thoughts revolted within, his eyes held a strange gleam. Then he sank back on the bunk and seemed to be dreaming, dreaming of something far, far in the past—of days gone by.

Ralph Weston faced a crisis. He had sworn, promised himself, that never again would he drink; that he would make a man of himself, that he would fight back—up the scarlet ladder to the top where success, redemption, and respect awaited him. . . . And now he was locked in with his three worst enemies—gin, whiskey and rum.

### CHAPTER III

It was late into the night, stormy and dismal, when a loud knock on the panel of the cabin door awoke Ralph. How long he had slept he had no manner of knowing. Hours, he judged. The swaying of the ship told him that Captain Nelson had put off from Samolo regardless of the bad weather. The loud knock sounded again. Ralph rose from the bunk and crossed to the door. He noticed the basin of gin and the jar of whiskey lay untouched where he had left them, in a far corner with the loaf of odorous bread. Apparently no one had been in the cabin.

"Who's there?" he called.

"First Mate Sunday," came the reply in a dull, growling voice. "Get yourself ready for deck duty—an' be quick!"

"I'm as ready now as I'll ever be," Ralph retorted.

"All right. Stand back—I'm comin' in!"

A key turned in the lock and the door swung abruptly open. Poised in the thick frame was "Czar" Sunday—First Mate of the "Blue Gull." He was everything that his appropriate title suggested. Tall and heavily built, with huge hands and a thick bulldog neck. Squinting eyes that blurred in watery sockets. A low corrugated brow that held a continual scowl; a wide mouth that hung loose with mean, colorless lips; and close clipped hair of a sandy shade. About his waist circled a leather belt of walnut color, from which hung a glistening revolver of high caliber. He took in Ralph with a sneering gaze and threw a wink over his broad shoulder at a short oily sailor who stood behind him. Then he laughed.

"So this is what Santa Claus brought us," he snickered. "Well, come on, sweet Horace—it's the deck for yuh."

Ralph did not reply. He realized the hopelessness of rebelling—the utter futility of fighting. They were numbers, and armed, while there was only himself. With downcast eyes and clenched fists, he stepped out in the swaying companionway and followed the oily sailor toward a visible hatchway. The First Mate followed at his heels. When they had climbed out of the hatch and on the rain dripping deck, he pointed toward a heap of oilskin.

“There’s a slicker for yuh,” he snapped. “Slide into it an’ lend a hand to that gang by the forward cabin.”

Ralph complied without a murmur. He worked steadily and hard with the sweating crew for the better share of three rain swept hours. No words were directed toward him other than the bellowing orders Czar Sunday issued. Apparently the sailors had been instructed to leave him alone, which Ralph far from regretted. They were a heterogeneous gang—dark skinned natives from the South Coast, Italians, Frenchmen, and a dozen breeds he was unable to classify. Finally the work was finished—the storm lulled—and the First Mate sorted him out from the others.

“Back to yer palace, Horace,” he commanded. “Time for java.”

When they reached the dingy cabin the girl, Loma Nelson, appeared in the companionway. She bowed sweetly to the First Mate and passed Ralph by as though he was invisible. When she was out of hearing and had disappeared in the direction of her father’s cabin, Czar Sunday gave vent to his feelings.

“Some hot morsel—that skirt,” he said. “I’ll lay my bet on her any day.”

Then he shoved Ralph in the cabin, and slamming the barrier, locked it. In a glance Ralph saw that someone had visited his prison while he had labored on the deck. Although the loaf of bread had disappeared, the jar and



basin remained. On the bunk lay a razor and strop, a tube of shaving cream and a much used brush. On the stool rested a small tray of steaming food.

Ralph lost no time in throwing off his wet slicker and diving into the dishes of simple foods. With the first bite of warm vegetables he dropped his knife and fork and spat out the mouthful on the floor. Tasting each dish, one by one, verified his suspicion—the foodstuffs had been flavored with gin, whiskey and rum. The pot he supposed to be coffee contained hot rum. The soup was a sickening mixture of gin and beans. The mashed potatoes were flavored with raw whiskey. Hungry as he was, the latter was all he could bear to consume. For an hour he utterly ignored the steaming pot of rum. Then he drank one small sup. After that he shaved precariously with a lather of gin and soap. Once he paused to drink a cup of the warm rum. When he had finished he took another. Then another after that. The pot dripped its last drop and Ralph fell into his bunk dead drunk. A mantle of slumber enveloped him almost instantly. Captain Nelson had spoken the truth—his promise had meant nothing, his oath had crumbled.

Presently the sound of a key in the cabin door became audible, but not loud enough to rouse Ralph. The door opened and Captain Nelson quietly entered. From a jug he carried under his arm, he filled the empty pot, and also the basin from which Ralph had shaved. Then he stood over the sleeping youth and grinned.

“What did I tell you, son,” he mumbled to himself. “I told you you were weak, and I was right. It’s a shame.”

A noise in the dimly illuminated companionway startled him. Loma stood motionless in the open door, an expression of astonishment on her olive tinged countenance. Her dark eyes under their long lashes stared at her father.

“Why, why father—what are you doing here this time of night?” she inquired, befuddled. “I missed you and thought

there might be something wrong. Has anything serious happened?"

"Nothing at all, Loma," the Captain replied in a stern voice. "You will kindly retire to your cabin, and after this stay away from this end of the companionway. Good-night!"

A nervous gleam shone in his blue eyes. He resembled a schoolboy caught in a naughty prank by a scolding teacher. Loma bowed and swiftly disappeared toward her own cabin, and it was not until the closing of her door sounded that the Captain regained his composure and, locking securely the barrier, followed in her wake.

Reaching the private realm of his forward cabin he lit a brass lamp that cast dim shadows on the swaying walls, and seated himself at a small desk built in the side of the ship. From a drawer he procured a ledger and turned to a definite page. Under the dim illumination, it read:

#### THE CASE OF RALPH WESTON

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Age 26.	American.	Drunkard.	Opium.
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#### FIRST DAY

*Fell for wallet and licked nigger. Plenty of guts—but weak. Don't savy what pulled him so low. Women? Grief? Or money?*

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#### FIRST NIGHT

*Worked him like hell under Czar. Crew and daughter don't know why I shanghaied him. Went to sleep dead drunk from gin and rum. Wrote the above before I saw him—I knew.*

For a long while the Captain stared at the notations in silence. Then he mumbled something inaudible and added in a scribble after the last word a single line. "And I was right"—it read. With a crafty grin he slid the ledger away and closed the drawer.

By the time Captain Nelson had left his cabin, made his way up the hatch to the wet deck, and reached the forward pit, the watch had changed with the dull ringing of a gong, and he found his First Mate at the wheel. The bulky Czar nodded a curt greeting and lent an alert ear.

"Remember what I told you about the fellow," the Captain instructed in a gruff voice. "He'll be drunk in the mornin', Czar. But pull him out at dawn and work him with the crew if you have to lick him, but go easy. No gun play or bolos, and pass the word to the crew that he's to be left alone. No talkin' to him, or anything. Them's my orders, Czar, an' I want 'em obeyed."

"Just as you say, Captain," the First Mate replied. "I'll have him workin'—don't fear. And in a week he'll be as tame as a lamb. I've met up with his kind before."

"Well, don't be too sure of yourself," was all the Captain answered. Then he turned on his heels and disappeared across the rain swept deck toward the hatchway.

A mean scowl twisted the lines of Czar Sunday's ugly face to a loathing expression. He eyed the Captain's departure with bead-like balls of hate. His moist hands clutched the wheel in a tight grip. Cold drops of sweat formed on his corrugated brow.

"God!—how I love you," he snarled. "Some day you'll not be handin' me out your damn orders. Some day I'll get you—I don't forget all the things you've done to me in the last year as quick as you think. I'll collect an' I'll collect plenty!"

## CHAPTER IV

On a bright tropical afternoon seven days from the start of Ralph Weston's imprisonment aboard the freighter, "Blue Gull," as the ward of Captain Nelson, let us peer over the aged seaman's shoulder and scan the scribbled notations in the ledger that lays on his desk. He has turned the leaves to the page marked, "The case of Ralph Weston," and he reads each line with deliberate care. A cynical smile creeps over his weather-beaten features as he notes the obvious progress of his experiment. He is alone in his cabin; the crew and his daughter are enjoying the warm sunshine on deck. It is the initial day of good weather since leaving Samolo:

### SECOND DAY

*Still drunk at dawn. Dragged on deck by Czar. Refused to work—knocked cold by Czar with black-jack. Carried to cabin and left alone with pot of hot rum and jar of whiskey. At sunset found both jar and pot empty—he was sleeping. Left him a tray of grub—seasoned with gin. At two bells he had eaten the junk and was drunker than ever. Left him lying on floor.*

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### THIRD DAY

*Still drunk. Eats all the grub we give him and drinks every drop of liquor. Sobered up this afternoon and shaved with gin lather. Loma is worried. Suspicious of my actions. Heard that she's been questioning the crew and keeping tab on the liquor supply. Shall I tell her? Truth?—or lie?—At midnight the specimen went on a drunken rampage in his cabin. Broke everything breakable—a damn good sign—he'll win out yet.*

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### FOURTH DAY

*Czar got him to scrub companionway after a punch or two. Specimen too drunk to fight. Loma questioned me on deck. Forced to tell her to mind her own affairs. She thinks I'm crazy—can't help it. I'll keep up my experiment or die. Specimen carried to cabin at noon. Fainted from exhaustion. Gave him the usual liquor and food. Dead drunk at sunset. Didn't shave—first good sign. Hope he don't kill himself.*



## FIFTH DAY

*Loma woke me at dawn and said she smelled opium in companionway. I rushed to specimen and found him sleeping on the floor. Loma was right about opium—odor came from crew quarters. Will investigate. Found Czar at wheel—he was drunk and smelled of hop. Sent him below. Something wrong with crew. Mutiny? Czar asked me if this was a prison-ship. Told him to go to hell. Specimen still drunk at two-bells. Eating regular. He'll win—if he lives.*

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## SIXTH DAY

*Worked specimen on deck this morning. He picked a scrap with Czar and three of the crew. He put up a good fight. Loma got wild and spoiled it by interfering when Czar clubbed specimen with black-jack. She made me give Czar hell and had one of the boys wash specimen's cracked head. Dragged him to his cabin and left him with liquor. I saw him at sunset—drunk as usual. He's got guts. Gradually overcoming weakness. I can see the change coming. Crew and Loma think I'm insane. Czar getting nasty—must take him down a notch. Specimen asked me what the devil I was trying to do with him. He'll know when I get damn good and ready to tell him. Saw Loma sneaking down companionway at dusk. Wonder what's up?*

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## SEVENTH DAY

*Saw specimen at cabin this morning. He looks sick. Didn't touch liquor or food. Shaved and washed himself in gin. He's beginning to hate liquor. Says he can't eat unless he gets plain grub. Tried to rush me but I calmed him with revolver. Everything's going just as I expected with him. Loma avoiding me. Czar standing in too good with crew. Shall I tell them? No—Loma might cause a fuss. Will see specimen this afternoon.*

Captain Nelson eyed for a moment his last notation. Then he shoved the ledger away in the drawer and strode out of the cabin. He met his First Mate in the companionway. Czar Sunday advanced swiftly and nodded toward Ralph's cabin. A snickering grin curved his loose lips.

"Glad I saw yuh," he growled. "Maybe you'd like to know that yer beloved daughter is visitin' with our honorable

guest. Saw her go in his cabin a minute ago. Didn't think yuh wanted him to be entertained."

The Captain did not reply. Shoving his First Mate aside, he walked hurriedly down the narrow companionway, a frown creasing his tanned brow. Czar followed several paces in his rear, his grin broadening with each step. Without knocking, the Captain jerked open the door and hesitated on the threshold. His fists were clenched and his complexion tinged to a scarlet hue. Czar stood behind him, his thick arms folded across his broad chest, his legs spread wide apart. Then the Captain advanced a step and muttered an oath. The First Mate laughed.

## CHAPTER V

For an hour following the termination of Captain Nelson's morning visit, Ralph had sat on the edge of his bunk and racked his mind for some plausible solution of the predicament in which he had been involved for the seven days past. Thoughts came to him that suggested various methods of escape. All were conflicting, and none actually solved his problem. He firmly believed the aged Captain to be insane—mad with some passionate mania. What his intentions were he could not so much as guess. The diet of liquor was itself unexplainable, and now he had reached the stage where he could no longer endure the odor of the rum and gin-seasoned foods, let alone digest them. Even the whiskey nauseated him, and the sight of the brimming jar standing in the corner provoked an utterly disgusted sigh. If anyone a month ago had told him that the sight or taste of liquor would turn his stomach, he would have thought the individual insane, but it had, it absolutely had. That he could not deny.

For the first five days and until the night of the sixth, he had managed to keep in a continual state of drunkenness, and also he had managed to consume the gin-flavored food, and furthermore, he did not detest either, but of course they were not any too pleasant, in such a quantity. And then when he awoke on the sixth night something he could not understand had come over him. At first he mistook it for seasickness, but the sea was placid and calm and disproved his belief. He rose from his bunk and poured out a cup of rum from the pot, and it was not until then that he realized that he was weaned. The thought took him by storm. Weaned—Lord, no!—impossible! But nevertheless it was a fact.

The very sight of the liquor provoked dizzy revolts in his mind and he crashed the pot and jar against the floor. His stomach seemed to be revolting in sickening whirls. He paced the dingy cabin from one wall to the other, which had only the effect of increasing his suffering. Then he stumbled to his knees and vomited and belched for all of an hour. When finally the sickening dizziness left him he was weak and faint. With effort he crawled into his bunk and dozed away in a welcome slumber.

And now as he sat on the edge of the bunk Ralph realized that his weaning from the liquor was for the time perfect. He vaguely wondered if Captain Nelson had deliberately attempted to cure him of the drinking habit—it was so impossible though that he threw it out of his thoughts as preposterous. Why should the aged seaman care about his welfare? There was no earthly reason, distant or present. So Ralph shifted his thoughts and concentrated on methods to pursue in obtaining a smoke. His cigarette supply had long been exhausted and he longed for a smoke, almost as much as he did for a good warm meal and a pot of steaming coffee.

The pressed straw mattress on his bunk was torn at one end and the filling presented possibilities. Jerking out a handful of the crisp straw, he rolled it tightly between his palms until it was fine and resembled loose tobacco. Then he procured a scrap of thin paper that the razor had been wrapped in and by exercising the utmost of care, was able to fashion a somewhat presentable cigarette. Placing it tenderly between his lips he nervously sought a match, but soon discovered that there was not so much as a single match on his person or anywhere in the cabin. With a brilliant vocal display of his emotions, he threw the crude cigarette to the floor and ground it beneath his heel.

“God!” he muttered through clenched teeth, “God! If



there was only some way to get out—to have a square chance . . . .”

A light rap on the locked door interrupted him. It sounded again. Then the lock snapped and the door abruptly swung open. The girl, Loma Nelson, quickly entered and closed the door behind her. She held a small tray littered with foodstuffs on her arm, and without a word she advanced and placed it on the bunk. Then she faced Ralph, who stood rigid in bewilderment, and smiled.

“You’d better eat,” she said, motioning toward the food. “No telling when father’s liable to hear of what I’ve done.”

“Well, this, this is indeed a surprise,” Ralph managed to stutter. “But perhaps I hadn’t better touch it—the Captain might punish you. He’s so very, very strict about my diet. Real food might harm me, he thinks.”

“No, you go right ahead and eat. He’s my father and I love him, but I’ve found out what he’s been feeding you and I couldn’t bear to think how much you must be suffering—it’s terrible, Mr. Weston. I—I don’t, I can’t imagine what’s come over him on this voyage. He’s never acted this way before—sometimes I’m afraid to be near him. It’s horrible to talk that way about my own father, but Mr. Weston, I think he has gone—gone insane. Something surely has happened.”

“Well, Miss Nelson, there’s some distinction in being his initial specimen in whatever he’s trying to do,” Ralph forced a smile. “But, honestly, I hardly consider the treatment I’ve been receiving as a compliment. You’re the first one aboard that seems to think I may be made of human flesh and blood. And I want to thank you for saving me the other day from that bull-necked Mate and his gang. They’d probably have killed me if you hadn’t interfered, and I’m sorry I wasn’t conscious long enough to thank you then.”

“I did nothing extraordinary,” the girl replied. “They were three to one, and I wouldn’t stand for it, that’s all.

But we mustn't talk about that now. Father's liable to come any minute—and here," she drew a brass key from her bosom and handed it to Ralph, "is the only passkey. Hide it, and when we get to port make your escape."

Ralph slipped the key in the flap of his shirt cuff and made positive that it could not drop. Then he sat down beside the tray of food and began to eat, for he was undeniably hungry and the odor of good food, after seven days of liquor-flavored morsels, stirred his appetite anew. Loma sat opposite him on the far side of the tray. For a moment neither spoke. Then when she saw that he was enjoying the meal, she curved her red lips to a sweet smile. Almost instantly, however, a frown creased her brow and the smile vanished.

"I'm worried," she declared. "Frankly worried. Father's acting so queer, and Czar, the First Mate, is doing something odd with the crew; everything seems to be going wrong all at once. I can't understand why he's treating you this way, or what it all means. Have you ever known him in the past? Or Jack, my brother?"

"No," Ralph replied between bites, "I've never even seen Captain Nelson before meeting him at Samolo. And I didn't know he had a son."

"Oh, well!" Loma exclaimed, "Father hasn't a son now. He died nearly six years ago; died at Port Said. You know, Mr. Weston, that gives me an idea—I hadn't even thought of before. It's not a very nice topic to talk about, but it may have something to do with the way he's treating you." She paused and threw Ralph a sharp glance. "You're a drunkard, aren't you, Mr. Weston? And he said you were a hop fiend—are you?"

For a moment Ralph did not answer. Then a cynical expression swept over his face and he leaned back against the wall of the bunk restfully. A cold gleam came to his dark eyes.

"Until I came aboard this ship, Miss Nelson," he replied, "I was in the habit of occasionally hitting the pipe, as they call it. And until last night I was a drunkard that loved his liquor. Loved it even more than life itself. But if I continue to feel as I do right now I'll never drink another drop—or even smell opium. I guess I'm cured. I've had so much in the past week that even the sight nauseates me. Whatever your father is trying to do, he's sure ruined my good taste for liquor, and I've been too sick and too drunk to even miss my hop."

"I didn't mean to be rude, or personal," Loma said after a moment of silence. "The reason I asked is because Jack, my brother, died at a British Hospital in an insane fit. He had followed in father's footsteps since he was fifteen. At twenty, opium and rum drove him insane. He was in a horrible condition, and died a year later. From that time until this, father has never taken a single drink. He blames himself for his son's death. I wonder if it has anything to do with you? Perhaps the thought has caused him to—to become mentally unbalanced. What do you think?"

"To be real frank, Miss Nelson," Ralph replied, "I agree with you. It's unfortunate, but your father must be unbalanced. But that doesn't answer the question of why he's picked on me for whatever it is he's doing. I guess he wanted about the lowest specimen of young manhood he could find, and in picking me, I guess he got it. I've gone pretty low, Miss Nelson, in the last year—I've dropped to the bottom of the ladder. Deeper than you'd even dare to imagine. But something happened to me the morning I came aboard at Samolo, something disgraceful that showed me how utterly low I was, and I made up my mind that I was going back up the scarlet ladder if it killed me, and then I met your father, Captain Nelson, and you know the rest. I thought I was done with liquor when I came



aboard this ship. But your father said my promises wouldn't last a week, and he was right. I don't know how long this spell I'm in now will last, but I'm going to try my hardest to leave it alone, and I can't do any more than that. I don't know," he added, after a pause of silence, "why I'm telling you all these things, Miss Nelson. If I've annoyed you, I'm sorry."

"You most certainly have not annoyed me," Loma quickly answered. "I am deeply interested. And I know Mr. Weston, that you're going to stick by your promise. When I first saw you that morning in the forward-cabin you looked just like one of the common derelicts you see everywhere out here in the Pacific—the dry blood on your face and the mud on your clothes had a lot to do with it—and that's honestly what I thought you were. But on the few occasions since that I've seen you when you were shaved and clean, I knew your were not like the others—the crew, Czar and that bunch. That's what first made me question father. He told me about getting you aboard with his wallet, and when I inquired for what purpose, he scowled and refused to answer—that's what made me investigate, and has led me to coming here. I knew, Mr. Weston, that you were different. Sounds trite, doesn't it? Dramatic and all that, but you are different, and I know that there has been a day in the past when you were a gentleman, and all the title implies. I'll bet I'm not far from being right, am I?"

"You're wrong, Miss Nelson," Ralph replied. "I've always been a drunkard, a . . . . ."

And it was then that the door swung on its rusty hinges and revealed Captain Nelson and his First Mate standing in the companionway. The Captain advanced, his eyes bulging, his cheeks flushed an angry crimson.

"What the devil do you mean by this, Loma?" he cried. "I gave orders to stay away from this cabin! I'm Captain



on this ship—an' you've disobeyed me." Before Loma could reply or Ralph could come to her aid, he turned and faced his First Mate. "Place her under arrest, Czar," he commanded, "and take her to my cabin!"

"Just a minute, Captain," Ralph leaped to his feet and stood before Loma. "There's nothing wrong in your daughter coming here. She pitied me, knew that I must be starving, and she did no more than what was right. I demand that you allow her to go to her own cabin unescorted—as man to man I demand it!"

"Stand out of my way!" the Captain shouted, his fists raised, his eyes blazing. "Stand out of my way or it's chains in the hold for you. Do you hear me?—move!"

Ralph held his ground firmly. Loma stepped to his side. Czar advanced, his jaw hung in a set thrust.

"I hear you, Captain," came the reply in a calm voice, "and I respect your position, but I refuse to move until Miss Nelson leaves this cabin of her own volition."

Loma crossed to the door and turned facing her father and Ralph. Czar stood in readiness at one side.

"If you want me, father," she said, "I'll be in my cabin. I know you don't mean what you say—you were just angry." Then she spoke directly to Ralph. "Thank you, ever and ever so much," she said. "I must be going. I've enjoyed my visit immensely, Mr. Weston. Good day."

With a smile she stepped out of the cabin and disappeared down the companionway. Ralph could not suppress a faint grin. The Captain eyed him angrily for a moment, then he turned and cast his First Mate a mean glance.

"Beat it!" he growled. "Upper deck—and stay there!"

When Czar had sulked down the companionway muttering a stream of inaudible curses, the Captain motioned Ralph to be seated on the bunk. Then he shoved his hand in the side pocket of his pea-jacket, and Ralph knew that it

fingered a revolver, which momentarily quelled his desire for revolt.

"Want a shot of gin?" he snarled the question. "Or a bit of rum?"

"No," Ralph replied. "No, thank you."

"Maybe you'd like a nip of bonded whiskey, what say?"

"At present I'm not drinking," came the reply.

The Captain chuckled.

"You're not so damn weak as I expected," he declared. Then he turned on his heels and strode out of the cabin. The door locked with a click. Ralph was left alone.

## CHAPTER VI

For a long while after the aged seaman had departed, Ralph paced the floor of his cabin from one wall to the other. Through the chambers of his mind mingled a mass of tangled thoughts and recollections of the past. To begin with he realized it had taken him four solid years of living hell to reach the pit Samolo had found him in, and only ten minutes to fall headlong in love; which presented a problem in itself.

Loma had seemed in their brief conversation the ideal girl (who the devil was he to have ideals, he asked himself); she was just the opposite of his own self, he knew, in every detail. Where she had succeeded, he had failed, and for the first time Ralph actually regretted his plunge. But it was too late for that now, he realized; to climb back and redeem himself was all that remained, and Ralph was determined. Not alone because she inspired him (or for any other sentimental reason), but because in the past week he had seen himself in the light that others saw him. First it had been Big Bimbo, the "nigger"; now it was Loma. Ralph realized she pitied him just as she would anything weak and helpless, and the realization of his disgrace for the second time in his life throbbed like a burning torch through his mind. Why hadn't he thought of these things before?—he asked himself. There was no answer, no answer whatever.

Then he paused and stood rigid, facing the port side off the cabin. Above his head a stream of golden sunlight poured in the dingy port hole. A tiny circle of blue marked the sky. For a moment Ralph Weston held a dead silence, his eyes riveted on the circle of sun tinged blue. Then he spread apart his legs, clenched his fists, and stretched out

an arm above his head. A firm, determined expression gripped his features.

"God!" he cried, "I'm not so vain as to imagine you'll hear me; I don't expect it and I don't deserve it! But I'm making this oath beneath your Heaven and under your judgment, and as I stand here, it is the oath of my life. If I am so weak as to fail may your hand sweep me from this earth—may you wreck me to everlasting doom! For the first time in four years I speak your name in reverence; I beg your judgment, good God. And this is my oath—common as it may be," he paused and bit his lips. "I swear never to drink a drop of liquor as long as I live, and never to touch opium again. I swear it, good Lord, swear it with all my heart. I've reached the bottom, but now I'm going back, back to the top of my ladder, where I'll prove my worth to those I've wronged, make myself a real man, and I mean what I say. I mean it, so help me, God!"

\* \* \*

There had been a time deep in the past when Ralph Weston, only son of Grover J., the famous Western Governor, had been exactly the gentleman that Loma had called him. Since his initial year at college he had slipped gradually from that pedestal, and then fell with a plunge to the very bottom. At college he had mixed with the wrong set, and that had been the beginning. Liquor was his weakness; he loved it; it was his playmate, his side-kick at first, and later his conqueror. There ensued one drunken party after another at college with the inevitable climax—he was suspended in disgrace. But Ralph didn't seem to care; he saw it coming and rather welcomed the diversion—it offered him a wider field for his playground. And so it occurred that into the man-about-town crowd he plunged, which was the second step of his descension. It was not long before his name was linked in scandals, and on several occasions it was only his



father's wealth and political position that saved him from arrest on various petty charges.

Ralph was the only son, and Grover J. Weston loved him dearly. All his desires and ambitions were wrapped in the future of his namesake, and try as he did by a hundred methods to stop Ralph's reckless, drunken and scandalous existence, he failed. He would cut off his allowance and Ralph would live on his friends or starve himself in the back room of a water front saloon. He would lecture him and Ralph would faithfully promise to reform—next day he would be as drunk as ever. Thus it continued—Ralph as the burden of his father's life, going deeper and deeper with each passing night.

Finally the time came when Grover J. Weston distinguished himself as the foremost Western Governor, and the press found it excellent sensational news to publish stories of Ralph's drunken escapades. These slanderous articles increased until the Governor was nearly tempted to publicly disown the one-time pride of his heart, and then a very startling thing occurred.

War was declared with Germany. When America took up arms, Ralph, overwhelmed with patriotic spirit, enlisted in the U. S. Marine Corps. It was a joyous day for his father when Ralph was sent to a Southern training camp, for he hoped that the Service would mould his son's character and make him into the real man that he had prayed for. Tears dimmed his eyes as the troop-train pulled out of the crowded terminal, but Grover J. was happy, happier than he had been at any time since his son's first failing.

One month later, a personal friend, Colonel Dunel Upton, wrote Governor Weston a very private letter and informed him that his son had deserted the Service, and that he was last seen in a saloon at San Francisco by a soldier on leave-of-absence who tried to make him re-don his uniform and return to the camp. But Ralph, so the soldier reported to

Colonel Upton, refused and in a drunken voice declared that he was "done with the rotten Service forever."

And that was the last word Governor Weston heard from his wayward son, and it broke his heart. Fortunately, he was able to suppress the disgraceful incident from the press—that was his only consolation. And from that day on—over four years—the Governor had lived with but one desire, one hope—that sometime his son would return—come back as a man, a real man and redeem himself in the face of his country, wipe out the disgraceful blotch from his character.

\* \* \*

After his desertion from the army, Ralph woke one day from a drunken daze that had lasted the better part of a month, and found himself in a dive at Honolulu. Then he hit the square-necked bottles again until he saw light in a Sydney waterfront bar. Opium got him at Peking for the first time. He bathed in rum at Ceylon, and then a windjammer dropped him at Samolo. Four years it had taken to make that voyage from one dumping place to the next, four years of living hell, and Ralph enjoyed every conscious moment of it until that morning at Samolo—then something had snapped, something vital. The curtain had lifted and he had seen himself as the degenerate he was; the worthless drunkard that his love for liquor had made him.

That day in the saloon at San Francisco when he had realized he was a deserter from the Marine Corps, a fugitive from the justice of his nation, and that he had probably broken his father's heart, Ralph knew he was too much of a coward to turn back. It meant prison, confinement, and, most of all, facing his father. So Ralph poured himself another drink and took the only alternative. Since then and until that morning at Samolo he had refused to think, refused to consider, and now here he was swearing in the name of God to fight back; throw off his hampering habits and face the music; and above all, be a man, a real man.

And it so occurred that Ralph Weston took his oath.

## CHAPTER VII

Perhaps there is no better manner to cover the days that followed the scene in the cabin with Loma and her father and Ralph, than to glance over the brief notations recorded in Captain Nelson's ledger. Although the comments are handwritten and scribbled, they tell the events in possibly the swiftest and most concise manner. Beginning with the following day—they read:

### EIGHTH DAY

*Specimen recovering—refuses liquor and gin food. Shaved with usual lather. Refused to talk to me. Seems to be doing a lot of thinking. I have hopes.*

---

### NINTH DAY

*Loma mad at me. She thinks I'm crazy; I guess she likes the specimen. Saw him at noon. Told him I wouldn't give him food till he drank a jar of gin. Left him with gin. Returned at midnight. Gin not touched. He asked me if I was going to an asylum when we get to China. I told him maybe he was. Left him with liquor and no food.*

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### TENTH DAY

*Saw him at dawn. Liquor untouched. Hasn't eaten for two days. Refused a shot of whiskey. He's got more guts than sense. Left him with liquor and promised him a meal if he'd drink.*

---

### ELEVENTH DAY

*Liquor not touched. By gad, he's better than I expected. Doing fine. Gave him his first real meal at noon. Loma forced me to do it. Cried and made a big fuss. Specimen didn't even thank me—asked about Loma. Wonder if he knew she sent food?*

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### TWELFTH DAY

*Heard row on deck at dawn. Found specimen knocking hell out of Czar. Loma watched fight from poop. I let him fight and held back crew. He knocked Czar un-*



conscious, then bowed to Loma and returned to his cabin and locked himself in. Questioned her and found out that Czar had been flirting with her. How did specimen know? Loma must have passkey.

---

#### THIRTEENTH DAY

Give specimen regular meals but nothing to drink but liquor. He won't drink. Can't make him. Saw him at dusk—he had a jar of water. Loma told me she gave it to him. I tried to give her fits but she left me talking. That is what I get for giving her a college education—should have kept her aboard ship.

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#### FOURTEENTH DAY

Docking at Shanghai, N. E. China tomorrow at dawn. Specimen same as yesterday. Loma gave him water again—refuses to touch liquor. I will put him in chains tonight—'fraid he's gonna make a break for shore. Wonder if Loma has gone and fallen in love with him? Damn those college educations. Maybe I'm crazy—?

---

#### FIFTEENTH DAY

With the aid of Czar and three sailors got specimen chained in hold—he put up a great scrap. Everything was going fine when Loma was out of sight—then she appeared and gave me the devil. Never figured on her when I began this little experiment. Why are women so dang fussy? Guess I will go crazy if I try to figure that out. How long shall I test specimen? When shall I tell him why I'm doing it? Docked at wharf eleven this morning—Czar and crew on shore leave—they're acting funny. Wonder what's up? Loma brought specimen food and water in hold this afternoon. I offered him whiskey—he laughed in my face and refused. I intend to go ashore tonight for business reasons. May sign for cargo voyage to Southampton, Eng. Wonder if specimen will like the cruise? Suez Canal and Mediterranean are nice this time of year but the English Channel not so good.

And now that we have read what Captain Nelson has to say, let us take a glance at Ralph in his prison, deep in the hold of the "Blue Gull." He is chained with mammoth iron links to the thick ribs of the ship, while the only light that pierces the gloomy shadows circles a swinging lantern that hangs from a beam above his head. His chains allow him



space to rest on a heap of straw and walk a single pace in each direction, or for diversion he may sit on the nearby crates of cargo. It is the evening of the day the "Blue Gull" docked at wharf eleven on the crowded waterfront at Shanghai. Outside, the rows of shaded lamps and swinging lanterns reflect their colored glows on the shimmering waters of the Oriental harbor. Windjammers, junks and tramp freighters jam side by side on the narrow docks. Along the cobblestone landing, dark dives and hop joints lean against the cargo warehouses, and on the crooked little passageways that call themselves streets, one may find men from every port in every nation—and women, too. It is a mean spot, this waterfront quarter of the Chinese metropolis of over a million yellow peoples; and when the pongee shades are drawn and night descends with a mantle of darkness, sinister figures and crouching shadows lurk in the dark corners. It has been said that in Shanghai one finds Barbary Coast, the Bowery, and Panama's Coconut Grove, combined, which is decidedly not a compliment to the rising civilization of China. But let us return to the hold of the "Blue Gull."

Ralph paces his prison as far as his chains will permit. His expression is that of a man who has grown weary of his burden. The past two weeks of strenuous exertion show plainly in his facial lines—it is not hard to imagine what he has gone through, both physical and mental. Within reach a jar of whiskey stands untouched, and also a partly empty basin of water that Loma has brought on a previous visit. He is clean shaven and an attempt at combing his hair has obviously been made.

Presently the slam of a trap-door closing over a hatchway becomes audible and a figure gradually emerges from the rim of darkness. It is Loma. She advances, a pretty smile curving her features and displaying a perfect row of pearly teeth; her black hair is twined about her shapely head

in a manner distinctly becoming. She is pretty, deliciously pretty, and the smile that beams on Ralph's face verifies the assertion.

"Oh, Ralph!" she cried—apparently their friendship has developed to intimacy in the passing days—"I never thought I'd be able to get them." She displayed a ring of large iron keys from the fold in her dress. "Father just left for shore this minute—he's awfully suspicious of me. Hid the keys in the forward-cabin, but I found them."

"That's wonderful of you, Loma," Ralph declared, "but I'm afraid you're risking a lot to get me out of this mess. Your father seems to need me so terribly much there's no telling what he may do to you when he discovers I'm gone. Perhaps I'd better stay."

"No, Ralph—you must go. Father's not responsible for what he's doing these last days, and I'm not going to see you suffer any longer. Somebody's got to redeem for what he does, and I can't imagine what he's liable to do to you next. It's not right for me to think that way of my own father, but what else can I think after the way I've seen him act?"

"It's true, Loma," Ralph replied, "but Captain Nelson is not himself, or what I'd imagine him to be when normal. I can't understand him; I don't profess to. But I still think it's a cowardly trick for me to run out on you this way and leave you to take the blame when you've done so much for me already. I'm going to refuse your kind offer for escape after all; I couldn't go. It would be playing the role of a cad to the limit, and I won't. I appreciate your wonderful kindness, Loma, but I will not leave you to face the music alone."

"Ralph!" Loma inserted one of the iron keys in the nearest lock, "I'll never forgive you as long as I live if you don't go immediately. I've had a hard enough time with father, and now if you're going to rebel, I'll give up!"

Ralph did not reply. With dexterous fingers Loma unlocked the chains from his wrists and ankles. Then she faced him squarely.

"Please, Ralph, please," she pleaded, "leave at once. I'm afraid of father for—for your sake. He'll not harm me; that I know, but it's—it's you he may do something to. Something terrible—so for my sake, go. Save me that constant fear I've lived under on this voyage, and please go. I beg it, Ralph—please."

Slipping the iron cuffs from his body Ralph followed Loma through the stacks of cargo crates and up the hatchway in silence. It was night outside on the deserted deck; a few stars and a heavily veiled moon made a feeble attempt at light; close by the narrow dock rested in a cloak of darkness; at the forward end a single guard paced the poop-deck, otherwise the freighter lay unwatched.

In the shadows near the gang plank Loma drew Ralph to one side and paused. Her gaze leveled with his and for a moment neither spoke. It might not have been, but it seemed as though a stray tear dimmed her dark eyes. Sometimes one is mistaken. Ralph must have suspected, for he took her slender hand in the palm of his own and squeezed it tenderly. Loma forced a smile, and Ralph tried to, but failed utterly. It would not have been difficult for a stranger to imagine them as lovers, but as has been said—one is mistaken, sometimes.

"You've been great, Loma," Ralph declared after a pause. "Just wonderful. There's no way I can thank you, no visible way, but I want you to know that I appreciate everything you've done. If it hadn't been for your kindness, I don't know what would have happened. I'm indebted to you, Loma, more than I can ever hope to repay, and I won't forget, ever."

"I did no more than what was right, Ralph," came the answer. "And now before you go, promise me for the sake

of our friendship that you will forget the taste of liquor, and above all, that filthy opium habit. Will you promise, Ralph?"

"I do, Loma. I absolutely do. After the way you've come to my aid I'd be the worst kind of a cheat to break my word to you, and I won't. I promise."

"Well, good-bye, then, Ralph—you'd better hurry. And I know from now on you're going to be the gentleman you were once—I know you were, Ralph. You can't hide that; it's deeper than skin. I must go," she added. "Good-bye, Ralph."

Before he was able to reply she had given his hand a tiny squeeze, and running up the gangplank, disappeared in the thick shadows that hung over the sleeping ship.

For a moment Ralph stood motionless in thought. Then he roused himself and swiftly darted down the wharf toward the lights of the cobblestoned landing. The dark night soon enveloped his figure and he was lost in the throngs that swarmed the narrow lanes. By the expression on his face, it was obvious that he was bent on some definite mission. But then in Shanghai various diversions await those who care to seek.



## CHAPTER VIII

When Loma ran up the gangplank that spread over the gap of murky water between the "Blue Gull," and the wharf, she did not go to her cabin as Ralph supposed. Instead, she uncovered a veil and coat from where she had previously hid them on the deck, and retraced her steps in a swift pace to the wharf. Ralph's departing figure was still visible in the distance and Loma lost no time in following, although she was almost forced to run. His fast stride wound through a tangled web of crooked streets and it was all she could do to keep him in sight. Once she feared she had lost him, but in a moment she saw him standing before a low structure on the far side of the crowded street and her alertness was doubly revived. A crimson Chinese lantern hung from the portals of the building in front of which he stood; the walls were almost entirely covered with Oriental characters; there was only one visible entrance, narrow and dingy; a small, bent-over Chinaman with beady eyes and pale yellow skin appeared at the door and shot Ralph a sharp glance; Ralph spoke; the Oriental replied, then they both entered.

And that step Ralph took into the dark portals was a severe blow to Loma; it seemed to her as though everything had been for nothing, for Loma had been in the Pacific ports too many years of her life not to recognize a haven of opium fiends. And when she realized that Ralph had broken his promise at the initial opportunity, she knew that in the judging of his character she had been mistaken, miserably mistaken.

She had thought his regeneration perfect—he had refused liquor, and he had been a drunkard—he had faithfully promised on their friendship to never touch opium, and he

had broken that promise as though it were little more (or less in fact) than the idle word of a liar. She would have staked her life on his redemption, she realized as she turned and retreated slowly toward the water front, and he had failed. Loma felt weak and disheartened. If only she had remained at the ship she would have been saved the sickening revelation; she could always have thought of him as she hoped he would be—but it was too late for that now. All that remained was to forget.

So Loma trudged wearily back to the "Blue Gull," her heart breaking with each step, her faith shattering with each second. Although she hated to admit it even to herself, Loma knew that Ralph had defeated her, and what a low, deceitful defeat it was—so mean and disgraceful that it was only by clenching her fists and biting her red lips that she could suppress the tears that were surging to burst forth. For her, life seemed empty.

\* \* \*

Foo Yen's hop joint, deep in the lungs of Shanghai, is a very active establishment on any night after seven—although one would seldom know the fact. Foo Yen doesn't tell you (and he'd undoubtedly lie if you inquired) that he handles over a hundred "patients" each night, but his profits verify the statement. His bunks are well built, and rise from the asphalt floor six tiers to the bamboo roof. The mattresses are soft enough; in-gu-pai (Chinese whiskey) is served without extra charge to the regular customers; the ge-rags are always smooth and seldom twist; one finds the yen-she-gow and small brass cooking taper of the most highly esteemed quality; the yen-hok (cooking needle) is always straight and one is never forced to cook with a hatpin; occasionally boisterous quarrels ensue, but Foo Yen is a clever proprietor and diplomatically subdues his angry customers before tragedy results; his pills are fresh and

black, and by a process all his own, Foo Yen rolls them to the size and shape of a garden pea—taking it all in all, Shanghai has plenty of reasons for being proud of the establishment. And it evidently is, for in the dimly illuminated chambers one may see the wealthiest merchants, the greatly respected soothsayers, the bankers and law-makers, and occasionally a lofty tong-leader of Manchu birth. And then, too (but not to Foo Yen's credit), the dark building often, very often, harbors derelicts stranded from foreign vessels, wrecks of human jetsam, of both sexes, and now and then a newcomer seeking relief from personal strife, which the short lived charm of poppy juice momentarily brings. It is a strange, exotic haven, this establishment of Foo Yen's, to say the least. And it was into the portals of this palace of dreams that Ralph followed the small bent-over Oriental—a henchman of Foo Yen's.

Trailing the shuffle of paper-soled sandals down a dark winding passageway, Ralph lost all sense of direction, and when finally the Chinaman parted a draping of yellow curtains and slid into a dimly lighted chamber, Ralph's trail was a tangled one. On every side the tiers of shaded bunks rose to the low roof; on most the curtains were drawn and small scarlet glows marked the flames of cooking tapers.

The Chinaman paused and nodded his head toward an open bunk on the second tier. A grin twisted his yellow features.

"You likee pill, queek?" he asked.

"Yes," Ralph replied, an eager expression displaying his anxiety. "Make it quick."

"Allite, mister. You go bunk. Me fix." He turned and shuffled to the far side of the chamber where he apparently vanished.

Ralph climbed over the first tier and into the vacant compartment. Quickly he removed his jacket and loosened his shirt about his neck. Then he lay prone, his head resting



in the wooden suey-pow. From the bunk below a female voice cried, "Can't yuh watch where yer steppin'? Like to put out me eye. Yuh dumb ingrate! Bet yer the guy I give that string of diamonds to."

Ralph laughed. Then an anxious frown swept over his face. His eyes shifted nervously. Presently the Oriental appeared carrying a burning taper and the necessary implements. Both Ralph's frown and nervousness vanished. He accepted the long bamboo pipe with a cynical smile. The Chinaman placed the tools in their correct positions, then he grinned and drew the shades over the bunk.

"You likee, eh?" he asked.

Ralph failed to answer, so the Chinaman slid silently out of the dim chamber and disappeared down the winding passageway.

For a moment Ralph stared at the slender pipe, the glowing taper, and the odorous black pills in motionless silence. Then he roused himself and with ease went about the intricate business of cooking over the small flame. Thick gray fumes rose and hung heavy in the air. With a wild gleam sparkling in his dark eyes he lifted the yen-hok and deliberately smelled the hot pill. His hand trembled and the taper jarred slightly, casting grotesque shadows on the drawn curtains.

And then Ralph Weston did a very unusual thing. He riveted his eyes directly on the odorous pill and burst into a weird peal of laughter that echoed and re-echoed against the hollow wall of the exotic chamber. Following the laughter, mutterings in various dialects were heard in the different compartments, and Ralph could faintly see a blond head protrude from the bunk below.

"For crime's sake!" the female voice cried. "Can't you think of somethin' better to do? I gave you those diamonds last night to shut up; now put on the lid an' get some respect or I'll take 'em back!"



But Ralph seemed not to hear. With deliberate fingers he crushed the warm pill and dropped it to the floor. One puff extinguished the taper's flame. Then he quickly fastened his shirt, drew on his jacket, and sat rigid, tense, his eyes staring at the bamboo pipe. A smile came to his face.

"I just wanted to know," he seemed to be addressing the untouched pipe, "how weak or how strong I am. And I've found out! I've beaten you, old man, I've beaten you! You're out with me; you're a has-been. I've seen you for the last time, and I didn't touch you! Now it's so-long, forever!"

With a leap he landed on the asphalt floor. The blonde female stared at him with watery eyes.

"Say, but yer fast," she declared. "You must hold the record. Suppose yer gonna beat it with my diamonds—just like you kings. No respect. Not a damn ——"

But by that time Ralph had reached the passageway and disappeared at a fast pace in the darkness. The female sighed and returned to her pipe.

"My diamonds," she groaned. "My poor, poor diamonds." And then she cooked another pill.

## CHAPTER IX

Reaching the cobblestoned landing at the waterfront, Ralph walked at a swift stride down the narrow wharf and kept as much as possible in the secreting shadows. His speedy departure from the honored (?) establishment of Foo Yen had been rather difficult to explain to the bewildered Oriental henchman, considering the fact that he failed to produce funds to pay for his visit, and he had been forced to shove the demanding Chinaman from his path and exercise no little amount of alertness in making his departure. But then, now that his regeneration had begun, Ralph was in no mood to allow finances to interfere, and so he left the opium haven by the only safe manner presenting itself, much to the jabbering dismay of the annoyed proprietor's henchman.

And now Ralph had reached the cargo warehouse opposite the docked "Blue Gull," so with slow, silent steps he gradually edged his way near the gang plank, keeping a sharp lookout for possible guards. On the poop-deck the watch paced back and forth (undoubtedly wishing he was ashore with the remainder of the crew). Otherwise the freighter was deserted. A bank of dark clouds had obliterated the few stars and feeble moon that were visible earlier in the night, and it was quite simple for Ralph to slide quickly up the gang plank unseen, and hurriedly make his way to a hatch on the port-side aft.

Quietly, lest the watch apprehend him, he lifted the trap-door over the steep ladder and descended into the cargo hold. It was pitch dark, and only after a diligent search did he find a match. Then he wound silently between the high stacks of crates and located a spot where by moving several

of the wooden boxes he was able to conceal himself from possible detection. The spot afforded a regular cavern, where by raising his head slightly he was able to see the hatchway. Fortunately it was in the rear hold; his prison had been in the forward, so there was little chance of a discovery by Captain Nelson.

Sitting down in a crouched position, he turned his thoughts to Loma and for a long time dwelt on her. He knew that the continual worry would return to her if she suspected he was aboard, so he decided to keep his presence a secret until he knew her father's wrath at the discovery of his own disappearance had subsided; then he would watch for an opportunity and make his appearance. In the meantime he would prowl the ship at night and guard her as best he could, for Ralph feared the time would come when Captain Nelson would lose his reason entirely, and he did not dare to imagine what would, or could possibly occur then.

If he returned to his prison and chains of his own volition, as he had frequently considered doing in the past hour, he realized Loma's fearful anxiety would return, and probably his penalty would be death eventually at her father's hands. So Ralph decided to stay by his decision, and await what turn in his destiny, fate and time brought.

He loved Loma, that he knew, and for a moment he vaguely wondered if she alone had been the instigator of his climb back up the ladder, his redemption, or had it also been Big Bimbo, the negro? Perhaps they together had given him the initial shove, but somehow he favored Loma. She had scorned him at first as a worthless derelict, a thief. Then she had pitied him as a weakling, a drunkard and hop fiend. And then she had come to his aid, helped him, made him promise. She had been wonderful. He wondered if she cared? Or was it just pity or to offset her father's insane treatment?

If Ralph could have been in Loma's cabin on the deck above, he would not have asked himself such a foolish question. For while Ralph thought of her and admitted his love, Loma lay in her compartment, tears dimming her dark eyes and wetting the crimson of her flushed cheeks. Her dreams had been shattered; the man who had promised, the man for whom she would have risked her own life, had failed, utterly failed, so Loma thought. (And did she not have very good reasons to think that way?) So she gave herself up to the sorrow that surged within her, and each passing moment increased her grief over her disillusionment.

But Ralph was far below, crouched in his cavern of crates, and his questions went unanswered. Then the groan of rusty hinges roused him, and presently the sound of many whispered voices came to his ears. He rose slightly and held an alert, rigid poise. The voices grew louder in volume until a square slab was lowered out of the port-side of the freighter and the yellow glow of a lantern emerged on the rim of the hold. A figure Ralph recognized as Czar's appeared at the opening. The First Mate advanced several steps in the hold, and then made a beckoning gesture toward the space where the slab of the ship's side had been lowered. Ralph was able to see that a small tug had been docked against the side of the "Blue Gull." Then several men he recognized as members of the crew entered the hold with lanterns, and he was forced to duck his head. Their voices were plainly audible, though, and presently a gruff command from Czar reached his ears.

"Quiet!" the First Mate commanded. "What the 'ell do you lubbers wanta do? Wake up all China? I'll smash the next gink that makes a noise—get that?"

"No need to get sore, Czar," Ralph heard a voice reply. "The Captain won't be back from the importation office for an hour—don't have to worry 'bout him. And Louie just come down from the deck; he says that the dame is in her



cabin. If she does hear us she'll think we're loading the regular cargo—she won't know the difference."

"Where we gonna stack these new crates?" a third voice cut in. It was vaguely familiar, and Ralph knew it to be one of the sailors.

"Move away those merchandise boxes," the First Mate answered, "an' pile 'em behind. Tell the other boys to hurry up—and double the watch on the wharf. Ain't gonna take no chances at bein' caught. There's others beside the Cap and his skirt we've gotta look out for, so take it soft and easy, and pass the word to the rest of the gang."

"All right, Czar," came the answer. "I'll start unloading now."

Ralph presently heard the scraping of many feet and he risked raising his head for a single glance. Czar was standing to one side and talking in a low tone to a man that looked very familiar—it was Gus LeVene of the Samolo Casino, but it was not until they both moved nearer and seated themselves on a crate hardly three paces from his cavern that Ralph verified the recognition. Conflicting thoughts flashed through his mind but he postponed them, and turned his attention to the scene that unfolded itself before his staring eyes.

From the tug that had been docked alongside the "Blue Gull" a gang plank had been lowered into the hold of the freighter, and as Ralph watched, a score or more of the ship's crew entered the dimly illuminated hold. They trailed one another down the gang plank in single file; each carried a slender four-foot crate. When they reached a cleared space next to the ribs of the freighter on the port side, they stacked the crates in an orderly pile, and then returned to the tug for another load. Thus the repetition continued until the stack of slender crates rose in a dozen or more piles, ten high. Then the crew returned down the gang plank with small square boxes, hardly larger

than pongee bales. These under Czar's direction they piled close to the crates. But Ralph did not watch longer. Gus LeVene had beckoned the First Mate to his side and as they conversed, Ralph was able to overhear them plainly, for the crew subdued their noises with Czar's warning, and the only sounds were the scraping of their feet on the deck of the hold and the stacking of the boxes. He edged his ear close to a small crevice and listened intently.

"Mighty lucky I saw you at Samolo, Czar," the Casino proprietor was speaking. "I'd had you in mind for this job since I got my commission from Kelmie at Constantinople. He's running the shipment of arms bureau for Pasquale's bandits. They're going to be the big blow-up following Kemal's advance in Asia Minor. You see, Czar, they ain't supposed to belong to Kemal's Army, but they're all Turks an' I'm thinking it's just a bright idea of Kemal's to shift the blame off his own shoulders when he licks the Greeks and advances and the wholesale murders follow. He's a wise bird, and before long Britain and the Allies are gonna know it. Take it from me, Czar, little old Asia Minor, and as far in as Smyrna, is gonna see some bloody butchering in the next few months. I got the line on it from Kelmie when he told me to get my gang together an' uncover this junk here at Shanghai. He was damn clever in keeping off suspicion by sending it here from the States and then sending it boat by boat to the Turkish bandit headquarters in Asia Minor. I give him credit—he'll make a million out of the deal. Think, Czar, ten ship loads, an' this is the fifth to leave already. Won't have any trouble with the Captain, will we? He's a Yankee, and might be tougher than the devil if he knew what was going on down here below. And I wouldn't blame him."

"Hell, no, Gus," came the First Mate's reply. "He's old and never comes down here—leaves it to me. The toad,

how I hate his guts. Rubs it in to me whenever he can, but I guess I'm payin' him back by puttin' this over. No chance of your friend, Kelmie, not havin' the gold to pay us with, is there?"

"I should say not," Gus answered. "You don't seem to realize what a big war this is gonna be. Why, the Turks under Kemal, the new National Army, and the bandits under Pasquale have been planning this affair since the Armistice. It's not just a row between the Turks and the Greeks and Armenians; it's the old, old scrap that's waged for centuries—the Christians against the Mohammedans, the Moslem race. And I'm telling you, Czar, England, Italy, France and maybe the States are gonna be dragged into it. You wait and see! Why, on this one little cargo of ammunition I've worked and waited for six months. Gold and big powers are behind Kelmie, and he's behind me, and a dozen others. I'm telling you the Turks are gonna do this thing right this time—they're gonna wipe the Greeks and the Armenians out of Asia Minor forever, Czar. You'll see what I've told you come true—just wait."

"Say, I didn't savy it was as big as that, Gus," the First Mate declared. "How far do you think the Turks'll advance?"

"They'll chase the Greek Army out of Ushak, the Meander Valley, Aidin and Nasili, and then Kemal's National Army will capture Smyrna—with Pasquale's cut-throating bandits right at his heels and doing the dirty work. That's who these guns and shells are for—Pasquale's blood-suckers, as they call 'em in Asia Minor, already. And, Czar, what they won't do to that seaport of Smyrna when they capture it, won't do nothing but make the horrors of Belgium look like a side show. By the way, before I forget," the Samolo Casino proprietor added, "I put Medsel in charge at Samolo when I left on the vessel two



days after you shoved off. I'm expectin' a message from Kelmie at Constantinople telling me where the transfer ship will meet us. I told Medsel to forward it special from Samolo an' we'll pick it up at Port Said or Colombo—maybe it'll reach us in the Canal."

"You were lucky, Gus," Czar declared, "in gettin' a fast ship out of Samolo after you got your orders. I was gettin' worried—thought we might miss connections. But now that everything's soft an' smooth we don't have to fear. The old duck is ashore signing up for a light cargo to Southampton, now — and that makes it swell for us — right in our trail, eh?"

"Swell is the word," came the reply. "I was worried, too. But say, Czar, have you made arrangements for a bunk and food to be fixed up down here for me? Best to post a guard at the hatchway, also—no telling but what the Cap might want to look things over."

"Sure, Gus. I got everything fixed. If he starts gettin' nosey we'll mutiny, and do as we want. I'd just as soon, anyway. But here," the First Mate added, "we'd better be shovin' off the tug an' laying low for a spell. The boys have got all the crates aboard, I guess."

Gradually the voices grew fainter as Gus and the First Mate departed, and the lanterns disappeared one by one. With a creaking groan from the hinges, the slab on the aft-side of the "Blue Gull" was lifted into place, and Ralph was left alone with a mass of utterly befuddled thoughts that raced incessantly through his astonished mind.

He had listened intently to every word of the conversation between the erstwhile Samolo Casino proprietor and Czar, and of all the information divulged by the pair of gun runners, he had come to only one single decision—Loma was in grave danger and it was up to him to save her. Should the crew mutiny under Czar's orders and do away



with Captain Nelson, he feared to imagine what might possibly occur to her. And then, too, the rebellious First Mate wanted her, that Ralph knew, and wanted her for his own personal use, and he thanked himself over and over for returning to the freighter where he would be on hand should the impending disaster occur.

It was so vague—the conversation he had overheard—and yet so deliberate, that Ralph knew not what to think. But gradually his mind cleared and then he began to plan—plan for the safety of Loma, the girl he loved. And it was late into the night before a grim smile came to his countenance and Ralph allowed slumber to cease his mental activity.

## CHAPTER X

How long she had been sleeping, Loma was unable to tell, as she suddenly awakened at a loud knocking on the panel of her cabin door. She rose from her compartment hurriedly, and throwing an Oriental kimono about her slender shoulders, answered the abrupt summons. Her father stood in the companionway, a scowl creasing his tanned brow. His cheeks were flushed an angry scarlet and a mad gleam flamed his blue eyes. Pushing her into the cabin, he advanced and slammed the door. Then he folded his hands behind his back and eyed her intently.

"Why did you help him escape?" he inquired in a harsh voice. "Speak, Loma—speak."

"Because you had no right to hold him, father," Loma calmly replied. "He has not harmed you."

"I do as I please aboard my own ship, and you've dishonored my orders for one time too many, Loma! I'm speaking now as Captain to subordinate—I demand the genuine reason!"

"I have given my reason."

"You have lied!"

"I refuse to discuss the question any longer."

"You'll tell the truth, or stand here all night!"

"All right, then, if you must know. I love him."

Captain Nelson did not reply. He seemed undecided. His fingers trembled nervously and the anger gradually left his cheeks. Then he motioned Loma to a chair, and wrinkled his brow in thought. For a long while he did not speak. Then a kind light came to his eyes—a light of sorrow. And he spoke.

"Loma," he said, "seeing as he's gone I might as well tell you everything—I'm sorry, though, real sorry that you

sent him away. He had guts, young Weston had—and he's a comer, remember that. I guess you think your old daddy is crazy, the way I've been treating him, and maybe I am. Once I read that insanity is hard to define. But when it comes to the case of young Weston I'm not—that, Loma, you'll soon see. It's a long story, so I'll start at the beginning." He seated himself in a deep rocker and crossed his legs. "I was an awful drunkard years ago, Loma—if you weren't old enough to recall—and a hop fiend, too. Your brother Jack took me as an example and you remember how he died—insane from liquor and dope. Since his death I've never tasted booze and I've never looked at a pipe. It's my fault that he died; there's no other way of lookin' at it. He followed in my footsteps, did what I did, and I just the same as killed him. I've never forgiven myself, Loma, never, not to this day. And I've always wanted to repent, to do something that would erase that terrible stain from my life. First, I thought by sendin' you to college and giving you a grand education, I'd be keeping you away from the pit your brother fell in, but even then I knew I hadn't done enough.

"And then one day an idea came to me, a great idea to redeem myself in the sight of God, so I went to work on it. For the five years past I've hunted in every port in the Pacific for a chap that'd fallen as low as my son had before he died, and until I saw young Weston in the Casino at Samolo, I'd never found one that had all the requirements. Must be young, a drunkard, a hop-head, and have guts. And, Loma, in young Weston I found 'em all. So I set my trap for him and got him. And——"

"But why, father," Loma interrupted. "Why did you treat him the way you did? You forced him to drink—you drove him lower. I can't see any sense in your plan—whatever it is."

"You will see sense in it, Loma," the Captain replied. "Now don't stop me—just listen. I've decided in these years since Jack died that there's only one way to stop a man from drinking liquor." And that's to make him drink more—force him to drink it, eat it, and live with it, until he has so much he never wants to see booze again. You know, Loma, you can get tired of anything, no matter how much you loved it once, if you have too much of it. And that was my plan—make young Weston so sick of liquor he'd never want to see it again. And then I was gonna start him on hop, same as I was doing with booze. I intended to feed him so much opium that he'd sicken at the smell of it. My plan was to make a man out of him, Loma—a real man. He had stamina and he'd have been a real man if you hadn't let him go. It would have taken months of sufferin' on his part, but he'd have won out in the end. But now, you've ruined it all, Loma. He'll lay off liquor all right for a while, but I'll bet you he's in a hop joint this minute—I've been a hop-head and I know what the craving is. You can judge for yourself whether or not I'm crazy, Loma, maybe I am, but all I was trying to do was to make a man out of young Weston and redeem myself in the eyes of God for my son's death. I did no more to Weston than I wish I'd had sense enough to do for Jack. I did to him, just what I wish to God some man could have done to my own son before he left us, and now my opportunity has gone. My one chance to redeem is no more. I guess that's about all there is to tell, Loma—I've failed."

With a weary sigh Captain Nelson leaned back in his chair and stared straight ahead. His blue eyes were watery and an utterly exhausted expression gripped his aged features.

"But father," Loma had risen to her feet in anguish, a feeling of despair sweeping over her. "Why, oh, why didn't



you tell me all this before? I really thought there was something wrong with you, or I'd never have helped him escape. What was I to believe?—you told me nothing; how was I to know your intentions were to reform him? If you only, only had!"

"I didn't tell you, Loma, for the same reason that I didn't tell him, or anybody," the Captain answered. "I knew if I told him, he'd have told me to mind my own business, and my plan would have failed in a minute, so I just did, and said nothing. And if I'd have told you, you wouldn't have understood. You'd have tried to make me treat him nicely, and if I had he'd never, never be a man. There was only one way left, and I chose that—do what I planned and tell nobody. But now it's all over, he's back where he can do as he pleases. And he's lost, Loma, he's lost."

"I'm sorry, father," Loma declared after a long pause of silence. Tears dimmed her dark eyes and her red lips trembled. "I'm sorry—it was all a big mistake on my part—I've ruined everything—even his character. If I'd have only known—but then I probably would have interfered anyway—I might have helped save him. But it's too late now, too late—how I hate myself for it. And why shouldn't I? He'd have been a real man some day if I'd kept out of it and let you alone, but now he's gone back. I don't suppose you'll ever forgive me, father, and I don't blame you, but I'm sorry. Sorrier than you think."

"That's all right Loma," her father declared. "You didn't understand, that was all. I blundered by not telling you. It's I that's in the wrong, and now don't you worry. You just forget it and everything will be all right."

"I'll try, father," came Loma's reply. "But it's not so easy to forget that you've probably ruined a man's chance for success, and that's just what I've done. And I love him, daddy, I love him."

"It'll come out all right, Loma. You be a brave girl and blame it on me. You thought you were helping the man you loved, and did what you thought was right. Now forget all that nonsense about ruining him. And by the way," it was obvious that the Captain was trying his utmost to switch the subject, "I've been to the importation headquarters all night. Signed for a big cargo at Southampton. We'll go light there and then bring a heavy load back. We're gonna have a great voyage—the Mediterranean is fine this time of year. And the only objection I've got is that there are a lot of rumors about war between the Turks and Greeks floatin' around. But then, I don't think we'll have to worry—there's always British and Yankee craft in the sea. Now you go back to bed, Loma," he added, rising and starting for the door. "Forget all those things and everything'll come out fine. Good night, dear."

The door closed as he trudged down the companionway. But his daughter did not do as he suggested. For a moment Loma stood silent, in meditation. Then an idea came to her, and before many seconds ensued it had developed to a plan of action.

Dressing hurriedly in a simple outfit of street clothes she swiftly left her cabin and mounted to the deck. It was still dark, although in the East the preliminary rays of dawn were coming gradually over the curve of the earth. Without glancing to right or left she descended the gang plank to the wharf and quickly departed in the direction of the row of dimly lighted buildings that marked the waterfront landing. Her mind was determined, her pace was fast, and she kept to the shadows as much as possible—but even then Loma did not avoid detection for a sinister figure had trailed her since her appearance on the deck. An individual that was just as determined as Loma herself. And thus they traversed the crooked streets that edge the waterfront—first Loma, and then hardly a dozen paces behind, the bulky figure of——.

## CHAPTER XI

Czar Sunday was leaning against the wall of the poop deck and bidding Gus LeVene good-night as the sound of footsteps suddenly became audible in the forward companionway. He had already made arrangements for a cot to be placed in the rear hold for the erstwhile Casino proprietor, where the latter might guard the valuable ammunition and rifles from what seemed to them both as improbable detection. As the footsteps drew nearer, Gus threw a final word over his shoulder and departed for the hold. But the First Mate, instead of retiring to the crew's quarters as he had mentioned to Gus, crouched low against the wall and watched with alert eyes the appearance of Loma from the companionway. When she had descended the gang plank to the wharf, he cautiously followed, making sure that his movements went unwatched.

Since the return of Loma from college a year previous, Czar had desired her, but never had the opportunity presented itself. He had made love after a fashion, but she had rebuked him on every occasion. It was utterly impossible for Czar to understand "why in blazes she didn't get sweet on him." In his own estimation he was perfect—without a flaw. He was huge in build and strong as a bull; he was a First Mate on her father's own ship; "what the devil could be wrong?"

But that she did not care for him, Czar knew. And she had emphasized it on several occasions. For instance, the morning she summoned the Captain's prisoner because Czar had held her hand against her will and tried to embrace her, and the young upstart, as Czar termed him, had given him one of the few beatings of his life. She had done that to



him, and there were many other offenses, even reporting him to her father when he flirted.

But now the opportunity had presented itself. It was late into the night; she was alone; no one had seen him follow. And then the question of where her destination might be, occurred to him and went unanswered, which had only the effect of increasing his pace. Delightful visions flitted through his vile mind, and his burly hands grew moist under the clenching desires that were scorching his emotions.

Loma had paused before a dark Oriental structure that Czar instantly recognized as Foo Yen's hop joint. As he ducked out of sight in a doorway across the narrow street, a bewildered expression twisted the deep lines of his face. Then gradually his astonishment vanished and a snickering grin came to his thin lips. His small beady eyes twinkled.

"So she's a hop-head, is she?" he asked himself in a low sneering tone. "Likes to dangle at the end of a Chink's bamboo, does she? Well, that makes her an' me stand together swell. From now on Miss Highbrow displays a lot of love for me or I put her dad wise. I guess she'll be kinda nice to me, after she's wise that I know; I guess she will all right. You bet!"

As he stood motionless in the dark doorway, Czar considered following Loma into the portals of the opium establishment that she had just entered, but with effort he calmed his passion and slowly retraced his steps toward the wharf. He realized that if he made his advance now that she might possibly confess to her father, which would mean his dismissal from the "Blue Gull" and therefore ruin his plans with Gus LeVene. So he decided to wait until the ammunition cargo was disposed of, and then face her with his information of her character, and thereby force her to buy his silence with her obvious charms. Although he hated to deny himself momentarily, he knew that his decision involved



no risk whatever, and would finally satisfy his desire. So he stood by it firmly and slowly made his way back to the ship, his self-satisfied grin very much in evidence.

\* \* \*

Without hesitation Loma entered the dim passageway and started for a door she expected to lead to the smoking haven. A pungent odor that hung soggy in the foul air nauseated her. Her nerves were on edge, but she was determined. From the shadows the bent-over figure of Foo Yen's henchman emerged. He blocked her advance, and his beady eyes stared at her from knife-like slits. Then he forced his gaping mouth to the semblance of a smile.

"You likee hop?" he asked in broken English.

"No," Loma replied, "I'm hunting for a young man with dark eyes and hair, clean shaven and nice appearing. He came here early, tonight. Will you take me to his bunk?"

"You want smoke fo yo'rself? You maybe likee pipe?"

"No," came Loma's declaration, "I told you I wanted to find a party that came here. I don't care to smoke; all I want is to find my friend. Will you allow me to hunt for him? I promise not to make any noise. May I?"

"You no smoke one leelee pipe?"

"No."

"You queek go. No can hunt; too much makee noise, Plenty people sleep; no can dream; you wake."

"But I promise not to make any noise."

"No likee hop, no can come in. Foo Yen telle me no smoke, no look. You go queek. Good-blye."

With a slight shove the Oriental propelled Loma swiftly toward the street portals. On the gutter curbing she pled for admittance once again. But the henchman did not even so much as reply. There had already been one guest who had departed without indulging that night, and the Chinaman was fortifying against a profitless repetition. So he

turned and left Loma on the curbing as he shuffled back into the passageway.

He had hardly disappeared when Loma's attention was held on a figure that emerged from the dark doorway. It was the blonde woman of Ralph's experience earlier in the night. Her hair hung over her shoulders in a tangled mass. Her flesh was pale and tinged with yellow, while her eyes were vague and expressionless. She advanced in a gliding stagger. Loma had begun her departure, but the woman's shrill voice halted her.

"Say, dearie," she cried. "Ain't leavin' me, are you? I got something wonderful to tell you. I met the grandest man, tonight, only I trusted him, oh, how I trusted him, and he stole me diamonds."

Loma attempted to pass on, but the blonde caught up with her and halted her progress by coiling an arm over her shoulder and neck. She laughed hideously, and thick tears wet her blurred eyes. Loma was at a loss to determine just what to do, or rather, how to do it.

"Sweetest little fellow I ever met," the woman declared with broad gestures and much gusto. "He was a king, dearie—too bad. Them kings never got respect. He nearly stepped in me eye. I forgave him though. I'm one of them good-hearted sort—inherit it from the virgin Mabel."

But by this time Loma had thrown the blonde from her, and was departing down the narrow lane at a swift stride. The scene had sickened her, she felt weak and faint. Far behind she could hear the woman's rasping voice.

"Don't leave me!" it screeched. "Stick by your old pal, she loves yuh, dearie, an' she'll give you the nicest string of diamonds ye ever did see!"

A chill came over Loma and she quickened her pace. In her mind she visioned Ralph smoking in a dive with such women, but somehow the thought failed to ring true. He

did not seem to fit in such a place, but yet she had seen him enter; what else could she believe?

But now he was gone—he had broken his promise, he had failed, and now he was gone. She thought so highly of him, he seemed so kind and nice, and now what a disgraceful disappointment he had proven. It was with a heart that hung heavy within her that Loma boarded the “Blue Gull” and silently passed down the companionway to her cabin. And long after she had undressed and climbed in her compartment, her sobs were faintly audible, for Loma Nelson, a daughter of the sea, had met her first great disillusionment.

## CHAPTER XII

With Captain Nelson on the forward deck and First Mate Czar at the wheel, the freighter "Blue Gull" wound through the crowded harbor with the morning tide and cut its way into the arrogant blue of the Pacific. Loma remained in her cabin and did not make her appearance on deck until Shanghai and the China coast-line had vanished in the far distance. Far below in the rear hold, Ralph amused himself by watching Gus LeVene count and recount, with frequent errors, the crates of rifles and boxes of ammunition. And thus did serenity lay over the "Blue Gull" as she nosed toward her far-off destination. But that was just the beginning.

On the morning of the third day of the voyage the chief steward and his Chinese cooks reported that ten cartons of soda crackers, four cans of pressed beef, five boxes of the Captain's private stock of cookies, and several miscellaneous portions of cooked vegetables, had disappeared under mysterious circumstances from the provision pantry. They also added, that someone had entered the galley late in the night and cooked themselves a very large and expensive meal, choosing the best of the stock.

Captain Nelson lined up the crew and gave them a lecture on the severe penalty of stealing while at sea. Then he ordered his First Mate to investigate, and dismissed the matter as petty. But on the fifth night of the voyage, he was awakened and informed that seaman Farell had risen from his bunk, the first one in the crew's quarters, and discovered his blankets gone, his knife missing from its sheath, and his slicker and rain hat absent from their usual hook.

Baffled, Captain Nelson ordered a thorough search for a possible stowaway, but an hour later Czar reported that the



entire ship had been diligently searched and no sign of an unlisted passenger uncovered. So the Captain again dismissed the matter and the freighter resumed its normal placidity once more.

Not again did the strange thefts occur until the "Blue Gull" had rounded Singapore and entered the waters of the Indian Ocean. Then seaman Gilson reported the loss of his woolen rough-weather sweater from where he had laid it on the deck while doing night watch. For the second time the ship was searched for a stowaway—but to no avail. So Captain Nelson decided that the thief was a member of the crew, and he began a systematic elimination. And thus did the mysterious problem rest.

It never occurred to the Captain or his First Mate, or in fact to anyone, that both seamen Farrell and Gilson had assisted on one occasion in administering a severe beating to a certain individual—Ralph Weston, by name. It never entered their minds, and it is quite doubtful that they would have connected him with the thefts even if it had. But of course the real culprit was no other than Ralph, himself. He had managed his night exploits only after exercising a vast quantity of care and ability, both physical and mental, which had naturally involved a great risk to his safety. But gradually, bit by bit, he satisfied both his desire for necessities and his amusement for revenge.

Then came an afternoon when the freighter neared Ceylon and Ralph crouched low behind his barrier of crates, and listened alertly to the conversation between Gus and the First Mate, who had just descended the hatchway from the deck. Their voices were loud and he was able to hear each word plainly.

"We're not gonna dock till we reach Suez," Czar was speaking. "The old lummoX gave me orders this mornin' to put straight for the Red Sea and the Canal. Decided not to

touch Colombo at all. So you'll have to pick up your message from Kelmie there."

"That'll be all right, Czar," came Gus' reply. "I gave my man at Samolo full dope and he'll get it to us, don't fear. But what's botherin' me is all the mystery going on around here. I've heard funny noises once or twice in the night, and they're not to my fancy. You don't think we've got a spy in the crew, do you?"

"Hell, no!" the First Mate exploded. "Didn't I tell yuh I got me own pals aboard, that I picked every one of 'em. That gang'll do what I say. An' besides we're payin' 'em plenty extra for this deal—why shouldn't they? What I think about them noises an' stealings that's been goin' on since we left Shanghai, is that one of the boys in the crew is hitting the old needle purty strong, and does the tricks while he's doped. That's my idea of it. I told the old lubber an' he agrees with me. We'll grab the bird yet—just wait."

"I never thought of that angle," Gus declared. "I guess you're right. And now," he added, "let's drag out that box of revolvers and load 'em. No telling but what we'll have to hand 'em out to the crew in case of trouble—better be prepared."

"I wuz thinkin' about that this mornin'," declared the First Mate. "Not a bad idear. We'll hide 'em over there under that wad of canvas, so as they'll be handy if we need 'em, but I doubt it. Everything's going smooth, far as I can see."

"Best to be ready, old man," Gus answered. "This is a big deal we're pulling and we don't want any hitches."

Exercising utmost caution, Ralph lifted his head above the barrier of crates and watched with eager interest the dragging of a single box from the huge stack. Gus immediately pried off the wooden lid with a short crow-bar and the First Mate assisted him in removing a score or more glistening

revolvers and boxes of cartridges from the padded interior. Ralph smiled when he noticed the opened crate was marked with Chinese characters and stenciled in scribbled lettering as containing slop merchandise.

But he did not smile for long, his interest was too sharply on edge. Both Gus and Czar were loading the revolvers, one by one. When the entire lot had been made ready for instant use they piled them under the aforementioned wad of canvas, and then retreated toward the hatchway. Ralph was able to hear faintly their last words as they neared the steep ladder.

"No use givin' 'em out to the boys, now," the First Mate was saying. "Might cause suspicion from the Cap, or a scrap among themselves. Keep 'em hid 'til we need 'em, that's my scheme."

"You're right," Ralph heard Gus reply, "but how about me going on deck in broad daylight?"

"Aw, that's all right," came the answer. "We'll sneak to the crew's quarters and lay low for a bit. Cap won't see us, he'll be forward this time o' day. And his skirt ain't hardly been out of her cabin since we left Shanghai. Don't know what's ailin' her, but I've a good idea. Come on, Gus," he added, "follow me."

Ralph heard the scraping of their feet on the hatchway as they ascended, and then followed the thud that marked the lowering of the trap-door. Raising himself on top of the nearest crate, he quickly scampered over the broad barrier and down to the deck of the hold. From the jar of water that stood by Gus' improvised bed on a narrow folding cot, he poured himself a large drink. Then he crossed to where the loaded revolvers had been concealed and selected one. From the lid of the hatchway a sound reached his ears. With lightning rapidity he climbed to his cavern behind the crates just in time to miss being seen by the recently departed pair. From a shadowed crevice he watched their advance.



"Holy mackerel!" Gus exclaimed as they neared the cot, "but that was a narrow escape. Thought you said that dame was keeping to her cabin?"

"I did," Czar declared, seating himself on a nearby box. "She ain't been down in this end o' the ship since we put off from China. Just strolling around casual, I guess."

"Don't suspicion us, does she?" Gus inquired.

"No, not a bit. I've had her watched. And, besides, she's got a mighty good reason to keep in her cabin," he chuckled slyly; "a dandy reason."

"You're not going to keep secrets from your pal, are you?" Gus demanded, a twinkle in his jet eyes.

"I'll tell you, Gus—when we get near our dumpin' place. You might wanta cut me out if I gave you the dope now. You're a handy sort with the women, yourself, and you might go me one better."

"Well, play it alone, Czar. But don't go and let a bit of fun interfere with our work; be careful. She's the Cap's daughter, remember."

"I'll wait, don't fear. Too much coin in this to do anythin' else. An' there's a sayin' that says the riper the fruit, the sweeter the eatin'. Well," he added, "I'll be goin' now, Gus. You lay low down here an' leave the deck and crew to me. So long."

For a long while after Czar left, Ralph burned with bitter resentment over the vile insinuations he had been forced to hear. Interference was out of the question, he realized, and would only jeopardize his possibilities of communicating with Loma and safeguarding her from the disaster that was impending. So he gradually calmed himself and shifted his thoughts to the plans that lurked in his mind. They were not definite, to be sure, but they were plans—plans of action—and Ralph was determined that no harm should befall the girl he loved, if it was in his power to ward it off. And Ralph intended to exercise every ounce of his ability to give him that power.



### CHAPTER XIII

Since the "Blue Gull" had glided out of Shanghai harbor, nearly three weeks past, Loma had remained in her cabin almost constantly. Her usual habit of promenading the deck had been neglected. Occasionally she had long conversations with her father, but otherwise she remained exclusively alone. Her disappointment over Ralph's obvious failure had dealt her a severe blow, and never did she think of what might have been, had she not interfered with her father's plan of redemption, but what she grew remorseful and utterly discouraged with life as it lay before her. Nothing seemed to hold charm or fancy. Everything, even her father, appeared morbid, dull, and repulsive. Life was absolutely empty. And these were naturally not pleasant sensations for Loma to experience. She hated to feel the way she did—but yet, how could she overcome them?

For an hour one hot morning the freighter paused at a wharf on the Port of Suez before going through the famous Suez Canal, and Loma took a brief walk along the waterfront as enjoyable recreation from the monotony life on board the ship had grown to be. She took little notice of Czar as he passed her on the gang plank, a stranger at his side, although at the time she thought it unusual that he would permit visitors aboard, especially when conditions in Asia Minor were so precarious. But then the First Mate was in the habit of doing about what he pleased, so she dismissed the trifle and turned her thoughts to more pressing subjects.

\* \* \*

Two weeks previous, the New Turkish National Army, under their conquering hero, Mustafa Kemal Pasha, had begun a triumphant advance against the faltering Greek

Army, and already the village of Ushak was in flames, while rumors told of evacuation by the Greek forces from the Meander Valley. The latter army was reported as retreating in utter disregard of discipline or command, and burning the villages which lay in their scarlet wake. The advance of the Turks to the seaport of Smyrna was expected within a week. Already the city was besieged with the wounded from the Greek forces and fleeing refugees totaling four hundred thousand. The towns of Aidin and Nasilin, on the Aidin Railway, were directly in the path of the unhalted Turkish advance and Kemal's forces were expected to enter before the following dusk. The last stronghold of the Greeks at Magnesia had already fallen and the city in flames was a grim prediction of the horrible fate that awaited Smyrna. The Casabar Railway had been crippled beyond repair, while in the seaport itself, the varied population of Greeks, Turks, Armenians and Italians were in riot, unable to secure accommodations to deliver them from the plight of fire, famine and horror that was bound to ensue. The conquering advance of Kemal's Army was reported as being in perfect control and order, and the blame for the rioting, wholesale murders and plundering was laid at the feet of Pasquale's tribe of Turkish bandits who followed at the heels of Kemal's advance and slaughtered with mad abandon all Greeks, Armenians and helpless non-combatants that chanced to fall in their riotous fangs. Apparently Gus LeVene had not been far from correct in his prediction of the coming war, although at the time his co-operator, Czar Sunday, had thought it rash exaggeration. But now as the "Blue Gull" paused at Suez, the concrete facts verified almost in detail his wildest assertion, and there ensued naturally a scene of "I told you so." Gus was that sort of an individual.

After what had possibly been an hour, Ralph felt the quivering of the freighter and then the rolling sway, and he knew that presently the passage through the Canal would be effected. The frequent (never less than once a day) conversations between the First Mate and the Samolo Casino proprietor had kept Ralph familiar with the progress of the "Blue Gull," and also informed him of many private details that were to become of priceless value in the near future. For instance the scene that occurred soon after the freighter departed from Suez and entered the Canal.

In the past several days Ralph had kept almost exclusively to his cavern among the crates, and although it was cramped and uncomfortable, it afforded him greater safety than roaming the deck under a continual risk. Occasionally he would drink a portion of Gus' water or snatch a bite of food that the gun-runner had failed to consume from a recent meal—but otherwise he held his shadowed position almost constantly. A definite plan had blossomed in his mind to forestay danger from Loma, should Czar and his crew mutiny, and he determined, even at the risk of his own life no harm should befall her, or, furthermore (although he knew not why), her father.

And now as he peered from the watch-hole crevice into the dim light that circled Gus' cot he perfected his plan of action to almost minute detail. A moment previous Czar had descended from the hatchway, followed by a tall, slender and dark complexioned man, whom Ralph recognized as a Turk, although the crimson fez atop his oily, black hair was replaced by an Occidental hat. The three of them stood in a triangle under a cabin lantern that cast an aureole of yellow to the deck of the hold, and Ralph, behind his barrier, was able to overhear every word. With broad gestures, the Turk spoke perfect English, and was apparently very excited.

"My friends," he was saying, "the time has come! No



longer shall the Mohammedans bend under the Greek knife. Turkey shall rule Asia Minor and the Straits—England, France and Italy must bend before our demands. And then, my friends, America will heed our power. We, under the great Kemal, shall conquer the world. Once again shall Constantinople be the capital of the universe! And I as personal representative for Pasquale's incomparable bandits offer you magnificent importers our heartiest congratulations for your splendid success. Kemal's great Army needs no arms or ammunition to further their brilliant advance, but, alas, Pasquale's forces are in dire need of both. We are fighting under separate leadership and following Kemal, but we are Turks. And today it is Turk and Turk, arm in arm, regardless. We have been unsuccessful in recovering the Greek arms, as we expected, and therefore your arrival has been anxiously awaited. Your co-operation has been magnificent to say the least, and in gold Pasquale shall reward you."

"Say, Chief," the First Mate cut in, "when do we get this said coin? Compliments is all right, but it's cash I'm after."

"When we are less than twelve miles from Smyrna," the Turk replied, "a small craft will meet us. It will be dawn, and if you can arrange to have the 'Blue Gull' become disabled at that moment, a transfer will be made then and there. Is it possible?"

"Sure," answered Czar, "anything is possible when I'm First Mate. But what I wanta know is where and when do we get the coin?"

"Right at that moment, my friend," came the reply. "Pasquale has made arrangements for a Sub-Chief to meet us with your share of the gold. You need not fear, Pasquale may be a bandit scorned throughout all Asia Minor, but he is a gentleman, and just as honorable as Kemal, himself. Place faith in my words."

"Oh, you don't need to worry, Czar," vowed Gus. "I've got Kelmie's word from Constantinople through my pal at Samolo, that these birds are good—good for what they say. I'll vouch for that, myself. But now, are you positive you



can stop this ship when the transfer boat arrives without the Cap or his dame knowing about it? It looks risky to me."

"Hell, yes!" the First Mate asserted. "I'll bungle the old wreck, and the Cap, too, if he tries to monkey. And the girl is not worth botherin' 'bout. I've got her under my thumb whenever I say the word. You remember what I told yuh when we left 'Shanghai—well, Gus I don't lie. Not about my women, anyway."

"Well, well," the Turk chuckled a smirking peal, "so my good friend includes among his many visible possessions a fair female. Is she the charming creature I passed on the gang plank? If so, you are fortunate—she is most delightful to the eye."

"That's her," Gus declared, "the Captain's pride. But Czar ain't got her yet; he's just thinking about what's to come."

"Don't you worry," the First Mate grinned, "she's mine for the askin', an' soon as we unload this high powered cargo, I'm gonna ask. And also I'm gonna get!"

"Leave it to Czar with the women," Gus remarked; "be they innocent or naughty he gets 'em, and the innocent first."

"Well, I'll be goin'," the First Mate declared, "the old lubber is looking for me I guess. Hell o' a lot of information he'll get from the crew, but it looks kinda bad. So-long, Chief, I'll have you a berth fixed up down here for the night with Gus. See you both in the mornin'."

The triangle dispersed with the ascending of Czar to the deck, and Ralph relaxed and paid little attention to the remaining pair. The passionate wrath that burned within him gradually calmed and he forced the First Mate's insinuations from his mind; but not until a battle with his desire to interfere had been fought and conquered. The vile discussion concerning Loma had wrought upon his emotions until he could hardly hold himself in control; but he succeeded, for he realized that as yet the time for interference had not arrived.

## CHAPTER XIV

Although he failed to possess a watch, Ralph guessed the hour as three. The incessant snores of the Turk in a cot beside Gus awakened him, which was quite fortunate, for he had intended to rise early. It was a matter of twenty minutes on his tiptoes before he cautiously reached the deck, unheard and unseen. It was warm and dark outside; not a single star illuminated the sky. He took a deep breath of the air, which was refreshing after the stuffy atmosphere of the hold, and silently crawled toward the forward cabins. A single light burned on the poop deck and silhouetted the watch as he paced back and forth. Otherwise the "Blue Gull" lay in total darkness.

Reaching a position where the walls of the cabins protruded on the deck and left a narrow runway cloaked in heavy shadows, Ralph crawled directly toward a closed and shaded port hole that was apparently his goal. By standing upright his head was level with the circular opening, and he peered at the oval lid a moment in critical examination. Unbuttoning his jacket and rolling up a rough-weather sweater (the property of seaman Gilson) Ralph displayed a pair of ugly revolvers (from the private stock of Czar and Gus, Inc.), protruding from a thick mahogany-colored belt (the one time knife support of seaman Farell).

Drawing the seaman's knife and one of the revolvers, he carefully inserted the former in the oval rim of the port hole and began a series of systematic prying. Ten minutes afterwards the circular lid opened under a cautious shove, and Ralph was able to peer into the darkness of Loma's cabin.

He was surprised to find her sleeping compartment so near; the soft sighs of her breathing came from almost

directly beneath the opened port hole. For a brief period this seemed to disturb his calculations, for he hesitated in meditation and seemed undecided on how to proceed. Then a thought evidently came to him for he drew a yard or more of burlap cord from a side pocket. Tied to one end of the string was a slip of paper; on the other he fastened the revolver. Then inch by inch, he lowered the revolver into the dark interior of the cabin, until it pulled no longer and he knew that the weapon rested on the soft covers of Loma's berth.

With a toss he dropped the end of the cord into the cabin, hurriedly closing the port hole lid, and beat a swift but silent retreat down the dark deck to the hatchway. From out of the shadows a bulky figure emerged, lantern in hand, and drew near. Ralph crouched flat against a mound of sail canvas and barely avoided being brushed by the First Mate as that worthy passed close by him.

At the hatchway that led to the aft hold, Czar lifted the trap-door and swiftly descended. For a second Ralph was undecided, then exercising all the caution he was able to muster, he slowly followed, step by step. It was very fortunate that several large crates of genuine cargo were stacked nearby the steep ladder, otherwise Ralph would have surely been apprehended. A minute later when he risked raising his head for a single glance, he found Czar talking to both the Turk and Gus, who were quickly dressing. The brass lantern hung on a nearby nail and illuminated them clearly. Their voices were faint, for they were farther away than usual from his cavern. Czar was speaking in an excited voice.

"I don't know what in hell to make of it," he declared. "Just comin' from the watch when first I set my eyes on it. I thought maybe it was the end of the world, or somethin.' You're familiar around these parts, Chief, whata yuh make o' it?"



"Why, my friends," the Turk replied, "it's Smyrna, Smyrna burning. Kemal's Army has already entered the seaport. We can't be more than fifteen miles away right this minute. How light is it outside? Nearly dawn?"

"Gettin' light in the East," the First Mate answered. "I've got a double watch on the forward deck with private orders. The old lummoX an' his kid are sleepin' like logs; we won't have any trouble from them. Suppose we'll meet the transfer ship in about half an hour, won't we, Chief?"

"Yes, according to orders. But perhaps you'd better go on deck and bring down about a score of your crew to make the exchange; we won't want to spend much time when the boat does arrive. Mr. LeVene, yourself and I will do the directing. Is that arrangement satisfactory, Mr. Sunday?"

"Keep a close watch, Czar," Guş cut in, "and the minute she's sighted give us the word, then you and the crew come below."

"Okeh," came the reply. "Leave it to me, men. I'll go through with this deal or know the reason why!"

The First Mate turned and headed for the hatchway. Ralph ducked down in the shadows of the crates, and lay flat on his stomach. Without glancing to right or left, Czar quickly mounted the steep ladder and slammed the trap-door after him. Ralph breathed easier; he could have touched the seaman as he passed.

By moving a merchandise crate several inches, he was able to fortify his position against everything but direct search. This he did very slowly and very quietly. When he glanced again at the aureole of yellow light, the Turk and Gus had finished their dressing and were examining the slab that had been lowered out of the freighter's side at Shanghai to receive the cargo of rifles and ammunition. Then a sound became audible from above and Ralph ducked in the shadows.



Headed by the First Mate, the greater share of the heterogeneous crew swiftly descended to the deck of the hold. They walked very quietly, and Czar warned them continually about noise. When they had reached the circle of light, he lined them in single file, and with the assistance of the Turk and Gus, uncovered the assortment of loaded revolvers from the wad of canvas and passed them out along the row, one to each seaman.

"She's pullin' up here to the aft," Ralph heard the First Mate declare. "I've got a man givin' her the signals; no need to worry, everything's goin' swell."

Then from his shaded position he watched the slab lowered to the tune of rusty hinges, and was able to distinguish the shape of a small tug resting in the calm waters. The rolling sway of the "Blue Gull" had ceased, and Ralph knew that Czar's plans to momentarily halt progress had succeeded. For a moment he wondered about the safety of Loma and her father, but the necessity of alertness compelled him to shift his thoughts to the scene at the ribs of the hold.

A wide gang plank had been lowered between the freighter and the smaller boat and the crew were swiftly transporting the crates and boxes across the gap of blue. Czar was aboard the tug with Gus and the Turk—to collect payment, so Ralph imagined. Presently the First Mate returned with Gus at his side; the Turk was evidently intending to land with the cargo. They paused at the rim of the hold and gave various commands to speed up the transfer. Then from the hatchway the sound as of someone descending quickly reached Ralph's ears, and he was startled to see the partly clad figure of Captain Nelson dash toward the First Mate.

"Stop!" the aged officer cried. "I, as Captain of this ship, command you to call a halt!"

"Captain, hell!" the First Mate snarled, gripping the aged

seaman by the front of his pea-jacket. "If anybody's Captain on this hunk o' cheese, it's me! Get that?"

"Mutiny, is it?" the Captain cried. "Then I fight!"

Jerking Czar's hand from his coat, he reached for his hip and lunged to one side. But before he was able to draw his weapon, Gus and two of the crew grappled with him and flung his frail figure to the deck of the hold. The First Mate laughed.

"Tie him tight, men," he ordered. "Little lubbers like him might get dangerous."

Never in his life had Ralph wanted to fight as he did then. His revolver was gripped in a moist hand and beads of perspiration formed on his brow. The abrupt appearance of Captain Nelson had shattered his already developed plans, and he was at a loss at how to interfere. Then a brilliant thought came to him. It meant a risk, a great risk, but Ralph threw precaution to the winds.

Edging his way, step by step, he circled the rim of light and gained a position where he would be able to dash for the hatchway when the appropriate moment for his intervention arrived. He had no sooner reached this momentary destination, when a member of the crew quickly descended the hatchway and ran toward the First Mate, who with Gus at his elbow, directed the tying of Captain Nelson. The latter lay prone with three seamen bending over him. His wrists were handcuffed with strong cord, and a soiled bandana handkerchief served as a gag. With a taunting remark, Czar relieved him of his revolver and tucked it away in his own belt. And then from the hatchway (which had been left open by the hurried descent) the seaman appeared on the run. Ralph was not only able to hear every word of the conversation that ensued, but the scene lay directly in front of his alert eyes, and he profited no little by the view.

"She's headed right for us," the seaman declared in an

excited voice. "Motor launch, I'd call her. Grover got the signals on the poop. She's calling for the Captain."

For a moment the First Mate did not reply. Then he picked up the Captain's hat from where it had fallen in the struggle, and set it jauntily on his own head.

"In that case I guess I'm Captain on this raft," he snickered. Then he faced Gus. "You keep 'em workin'," he ordered, "and when yer loaded shove off. I'll tend to the deck."

"Been going swift so far," Gus declared. "Should be done in about three or four minutes. If you need help, remember the boys have got those loaded gats, and I'm thinking they'd love to use 'em."

"I'll give the word if they's any row," the First Mate answered. Then he turned on his heels and started for the hatchway. The seaman who had come from the deck followed. They passed within two feet of Ralph without noticing him. He eyed their ascension intently, then threw a backward glance over his shoulder at the nearby rim of light, and followed.

Reaching the deck at the heels of the pair, he sought concealment and found it behind a lay of sail canvas near the main mast. Dawn had streaked the sky a silver gray and in the East the preliminary rays of morning sun gave the effect a shade of gilt. It was quick work on the part of Ralph to discover so perfect a hiding place. Pulling back a fold of the sail he was able to watch the swift approach of a motor launch on the port side. It was jammed with people, and on a small cabin a seaman signaled to the "Blue Gull" with colored flags.

Ralph turned his attention to the larboard and was startled to behold the horizon a scarlet red in color. The Turk had mentioned the burning of Smyrna, he recalled, and the advance of Kemal's Army into the seaport. It seemed to

Ralph, as he recalled his Sunday School lessons in the far, far past, that Smyrna was a vast city, an outlet for the commerce of Asia Minor. He vaguely speculated as to the amount of suffering, rioting, and starving, the burning of such a metropolis would cause. Then his gaze lowered to the water for a moment and the loading of the tug held him.



## CHAPTER XV

Loma sat up in her berth abruptly. Something, some commotion on the deck had awakened her, she knew not what. A column of gray light streamed in from the port hole above her head and she realized that it verged on morning. Quickly jumping from the compartment she started for her clothes closet, when an object on the berth caused her to stop dead in her tracks.

It was a revolver, joined by a length of cord to a slip of writing paper. Under Loma's examination, scribbled handwriting (evidently done with burnt matches) read:

"Keep this with you and use it—  
danger ahead—a friend."

Without a moment of hesitation, Loma hurried into her clothes, threw a cloak about her shoulders, tucked the revolver in her waist, and then started for her father's cabin across the companionway. Something jabbed her in the back as she stepped to her father's door, and she turned to face a member of the crew, gun in hand. His eyes held a cold gleam and his jaw hung in a sneering droop.

"Stick 'em up!" he demanded, "and hold 'em there! Yer under arrest. Captain Czar Sunday's order."

Loma obediently complied, and with features under perfect control stared into the mean face. She realized the futility of rebellion, and decided to wait her opportunity.

"Go on up the companionway to the edge o' the deck," the seaman ordered, "and not a bum move or I'll plug yuh!"

Loma walked the short distance without answering. A strange sight met her eyes. The First Mate, with her father's uniform cap on his head, stood at the larboard railing with several members of the crew circling him. A gang-

plank was being lowered to the deck of a motor launch crowded to the railings with men in civilian clothes. On a small cabin a man in uniform (United States Navy, Loma recognized) was speaking through a megaphone to Czar. She listened intently to his words.

"Forced to demand this service in the name of the United States Government," he declared. "Smyrna is in flames and our citizens are in danger of the rioting that's going on. Take these gentlemen aboard and proceed to Constantinople. We would continue but are overcrowded and fear capsization. United States destroyer 329 expected at any hour, but conditions ashore became too precarious for further delay."

The officer with the megaphone turned and pointed to a tall gray haired man that stood near the railing of the launch.

"United States Senator Grover J. Weston is in charge," he called to Czar. "This is the Government Investigation Bureau, just returned from Russia. If you meet destroyer 329 signal her commanding officer and make a transfer. In the meantime make the best speed possible. Senator Weston will inform you, Captain, of anything I've overlooked."

A scowl creased the First Mate's brow, but he directed the ascension of the refugees with a forced smile, and Loma shuddered at the thought of what might follow. The seaman behind, pressed his revolver against her back and warned her in an undertone to maintain her silence. She complied, although a desire to intervene almost overcame her. What had happened to her father, she wondered? Possibly killed, but she hardly imagined the First Mate would go so far as that. Then she turned her mind to the tall, gray-haired man that led the column up the gang plank. He was shaking Czar's hand now and talking in a low voice which Loma was unable to overhear. The transfer was quickly executed and not less than a score of American civilians presently lined the larboard deck of the "Blue

Gull." With a shrill screech from the motor, the uniformed officer waved a farewell, and the launch headed back for the scarlet horizon that marked the shore.

"Senator Weston," the officer had called the tall man, Loma recalled. That had been Ralph's name, but the thought that he could possibly be his father never entered her mind. And then a thud sounded behind her back and she risked turning about. Her dark eyes bulged in their fringed sockets, and she stared unbelieving.

The seaman lay in a heap on the floor of the companionway, blood oozing from a cut on his scalp. Ralph stood over him, a revolver gripped in his hand, a broad smile curving his lips.

"Your father is all right Loma," he said, "but hurry—follow me."

Her mind revolving in befuddling circles, Loma managed to follow, but that was all. To reply was out of the question. Ralph—her Ralph? When? How? Where? And a myriad other unanswerable problems flashed across her mind. They had reached the aft-end of the companionway when Ralph halted. He bent down on his knees and motioned her to do likewise. His gaze leveled on the water and Loma allowed hers to follow.

A tug, its deck stacked high with crates, paused nearby the "Blue Gull." Gus LeVene and the Turk stood side by side near the helm and watched the swift departure of the motor-launch, which had made the transfer of the refugees on the opposite side of the freighter, and out of view. Ralph did not speak, and so great was Loma's befuddlement, that she was unable to. Once he patted her hand and smiled, and she returned the glance, but almost instantly he returned his eyes to the tug and assumed a tense, rigid pose.

Presently the motor launch disappeared, and with a chug



from its engine, the tug began to follow. When it was possibly thirty yards from the "Blue Gull," Ralph drew his revolver and aimed at the stack of crates on the deck. He pulled the trigger five times, and with the fifth shot a mighty roar sounded on the tug and blew the light craft into a dozen pieces, as crate after crate of ammunition and high-powered explosives were ignited. When the dense smoke cleared from the air, the tug, devoid of human life and, blazing like Smyrna, had already begun to sink. A smile came to Ralph's countenance.

"Point one in our favor," he declared. "Now for the next."

But the barrels of several very ugly revolvers halted any further movement. Czar, with two of the crew, appeared in the companionway. They advanced aiming.

"Get on yer feet, the both o' yuh!" the First Mate commanded.

As they complied, Ralph dropped his revolver to the floor and squeezed Loma's hand. His eyes twinkled and he grinned.

"No use resisting, Loma," he said, "they can't do any more than kill me, and I've already helped put a stop to the wholesale murdering that's going on ashore. I'm satisfied."

"You won't be satisfied long," Czar growled. "What don't happen to you for this little trick ain't worth doin'."

"Just as your honor says, Mister Captain," Ralph mocked. "I've had my fun, now I'm ready for the medicine. Where do we go from here?"

"Shut up!" snarled the First Mate. Then he addressed the pair of seamen: "Lead 'em to the larboard deck," he commanded. "I'll follow. Wait!" he added. "Search Miss Nelson for a gun."

From Loma's belt one of the seamen drew the revolver and handed it to Czar. Then with the seamen leading,



Loma and Ralph in the middle, and Czar following, the short column headed up the companionway and presently emerged on the larboard deck.

A startling sight met Loma and Ralph. Senator Grover J. Weston and the members of the United States Bureau for the Investigation of Conditions in Russia were lined in a single file, their hands above their heads, their personal belongings piled in a heap on the deck. Facing them was the mutinied crew of the freighter, revolvers drawn and aimed.

Ralph did not recognize his father. He and Loma were ordered by the First Mate to stand in the neck of the companionway, and a clear view was not possible.

"Watch 'em close," Czar ordered the pair of seamen, "an' if they make a break—shoot!"

Then he advanced to the line of seamen that guarded the group of Americans. "Head for Port Said," he called to a man on the poop deck, "and make it fast!" Then he faced the nearest seaman. "Crawford," he said, "get a can o' paint an' mark out the name of 'Blue Gull—Portland—U. S. A.' on the helm. An' you, Meckster," he added, addressing the next man, "lower the flag and keep a sharp lookout from the mast."

The seamen had hardly started for their duties, when the man on the poop deck called to Czar. He held a pair of binoculars in his hand and pointed to the port side.

"Sighted a destroyer on the port side," he cried. "She's headin' straight for us. American—I think."

A murmur arose from the line of Americans, and the seamen edged nearer with their revolvers. Czar bellowed an order.

"Make our gang o' distinguished guests lay down on the deck an' keep quiet," he yelled. Then he turned to the man on the poop deck. "Send the orders from me," he com-

manded, "as full speed ahead. Tell Farrell on the wheel to head East."

Reluctantly Senator Weston and his organization lay prone on the deck as the members of the crew threatened them with aimed revolvers. Ralph and Loma were forced back several paces in the companionway, and somehow, Loma noticed, Ralph did not seem so terribly disturbed as he should have been under the grave circumstances. A smile played continually on his lips and occasionally he made an unconcerned remark. Their guards had permitted them to talk a little, but now as the destroyer was within plain view, they demanded silence. Ralph grinned and complied.

## CHAPTER XVI

At the helm of the United States Navy Destroyer, number 329, a sailor, garbed immaculately in white, colored flags held in his hands, turned and faced the Commanding Officer.

"They report, sir," he said, "as a freighter from Suez. No refugees aboard. Also they claim to have seen the explosion in the distance but do not know its origin."

"Order them to proceed," the Officer commanded. "We apologize—mistake in identity."

Then he turned and entered the forward cabin. A Petty Officer gripped the wheel. They exchanged salutations.

"Shift your course," he ordered, "direct to Smyrna. I don't think Senator Weston's — — —"

The sailor with the signaling flags appeared at the doorway and interrupted the speech. His excitement was obvious.

"Report, sir," he said. "As I watched the freighter's larboard I saw signs of a struggle. A fight on deck ensued and one man leaped overboard and is swimming toward us. Shots from one gun have been fired at him."

"Head for the man and then for the ship!" the Commander cried, addressing the petty Officer. "And you," he added to the sailor, "report to Officer Whitley and order the gun crew to their positions. Then signal the freighter to stop—or we fire!"

One minute later Destroyer 329 was headed for Ralph Weston at full speed.

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After studying the sensational accounts of the brilliant rescue as reported in the three leading New York City newspapers, the Philadelphia Public Ledger and the Los Angeles Times, I have selected headlines and articles from each to conclude my narrative:

## HEROIC EFFORT OF ONE AMERICAN SAVES LIVES OF SENATOR WESTON AND INVESTIGATION BUREAU AT SMYRNA

Constantinople, September 12, 1922.

Only the heroic bravery of Ralph Weston, son of Senator Grover J. Weston, saved the life of his father and twenty-five members of the American Bureau of Investigation.

The party were returning from Russia when caught in the advance of Kemal's Army at the seaport of Smyrna where they awaited transportation to Italy.

When the city was burned the U. S. Destroyer 329 was ordered to Smyrna to take them aboard. Conditions in the seaport became so precarious that the party was forced to leave in a motor launch. The freighter Blue Gull was overtaken and a transfer executed at sea.

The Blue Gull is an American ship from Portland, Oregon. The crew had mutinied under the command of First Mate Sunday, and Captain Nelson and his daughter, Loma, were in grave danger. Once Senator Weston and his party were aboard, they were taken prisoners by the crew.

The Destroyer 329 met the Blue Gull and by an exchange of signals was convinced that no American refugees were aboard. The Destroyer headed for Smyrna when Ralph Weston, in the face of a dozen revolvers, fought a terrific fist battle with his captors and succeeded in jumping overboard. For some unexplained reason, the revolvers in the hands of the crew failed to discharge, and it was not until the First Mate used a weapon taken from the daughter of Captain Nelson, that shots were fired at Mr. Weston as he swam toward the Destroyer, and the party of American refugees, who had followed his lead and rebelled, were quieted.

(Ralph might have informed the reporter of this article the reason for the non-explosion of the revolvers, but he chose to remain silent—as heroes usually do.)

Sailor Whellin of the Destroyer sighted the fight on the Blue Gull and the dive of Weston to the sea. Commanding Officer Lichston ordered full speed ahead and Weston was rescued. He told what had occurred and the Destroyer gave chase to the fleeing freighter. After firing a shot across the bow it was overtaken, but only after a severe hand to hand fight, in which Weston again distinguished himself by conquering the First Mate as he fled with the Captain's daughter, was the mutinied crew subdued. Captain



Nelson was released from the hold and the Blue Gull proceeded to Constantinople flying the American flag and escorted by the Destroyer.

Mr. Ralph Weston was wounded twice, but not severely, as he swam for help after creating the fight that caught the attention of Sailor Whellin. It was a great bit of personal heroism on his part, according to eye-witnesses, and it is possible that he will be awarded the Congregational Medal for extreme bravery under fire. Not since the World War has an American citizen distinguished himself under such a test. And whether or not Mr. Weston receives the Medal, he certainly deserves an award of some sort for his meritorious display of bravery. What might have been the fate of his father and the accompanying party, had not Mr. Weston risked his own life, is difficult to surmise.

\* \* \*

Of course everything was explained, as it usually is, and Loma learned why Ralph went to Foo Yen's haven that night in Shanghai, and Ralph learned why Captain Nelson subjected him to the strange diet.

And it is as unnecessary for me to tell you that Senator Weston is the proudest and happiest man in the world; that Captain Nelson admits he was wrong in the first place about his specimen's character (weakness); that when a certain Colonel Upton of the U. S. Marines, read the above article, he forgot there ever was such a deserter as the Senator's namesake, and that Czar Sunday and his crew are interned definitely by the authorities, as it is for me to tell you that Captain Nelson exercised his ministerial authority and performed a marriage at sea, while Senator Weston looked on with approval.

It had been a battle for Ralph Weston, a great battle up the scarlet ladder, step by step, to the top and success. But he had fought like a man always fights, and he had won—not only over his vile habits, but he had won the right to the love of his own father, and had married the most wonderful girl in all the world (which is a very trite but a very effective way of putting it).



SAY IT WITH DREAMS







# SAY IT WITH DREAMS

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## CHAPTER I

It wasn't so much the fact that Marie Vardell and Company went broke and left her meager salary unpaid that bothered Irene. What upset her usual poise and perfectly balanced equilibrium and annoyed her considerably, was the distance in harsh cold miles that separated her dancing feet from the pleasing planks of a new stage—which meant, of course, that she had expended several of her very few dollars to inform a booking agent of her predicament, and that he had, in return, answered her with an offer in San Francisco, transportation not forwarded, some two hundred miles distant. How to get there was the problem, at present unanswerable.

Recounting her financial status for perhaps the one-hundredth time, she balanced it at an even nine dollars. The fare to the Bay City totaled fifteen dollars and fifty cents. Thanks to the remaining funds of the dispersed troupe, her heretofore delinquent hotel bill was paid to date, and, furthermore, she had indulged in the favorite pastime of eating, less than ten hours previous. This was a comforting recollection to be sure, but did not assist in the least to transport her salary drawing pumps to 'Frisco and the new stage that waited.

Irene Dare, better known to the small time circuits as "That Kid From Madrid," was a youthful product in a twice-a-day game that should have been a lot better known and for which she should have been drawing a much heavier salary. A year previous, when she calmly defied her rigid aunt and left the sleeping village of Oakdale to write her

name in bright lights across the theatrical world, her ambitions had been almost beyond imagination. It was the old story. Everyone at the local High School entertainments thought her dancing beyond compare. At the socials she was a riot. And that was the beginning of her career, as most careers begin.

Naturally Aunt Celia was flatly against such idiotic foolishness from the start. And if Irene had abided by her staunch arguments this story would never have been written. But Irene had a mind of her own and she used it. Under remarkable circumstances, too. For Aunt Celia was a very wealthy woman, as most aunts are in fiction realms, and she had no heir other than Irene. To disobey the mandate of money is bad business, but Irene knew absolutely that success would be hers, and she took the chance.

A month afterwards found her in the rear row of a vaudeville chorus. Then came a specialty number and she was given the rare opportunity of doing a single. A Californian by birth, she chose the costume and dance of her native-land—a Spanish tango—but the parrot-beaked producers of the show, with an insight for publicity, billed her as “That Kid From Madrid” and the title stuck. She was not bad in the number, and she was deliciously pretty, so she clung to it from one troupe to the next. Hence her stranded predicament—two hundred miles from a job and salary, with hardly more than half the fare. Rather annoying, one would say, at the least.

Should she wire Aunt Celia her plight, undoubtedly it would be instantly solved, for she knew where the tender spot lay, and furthermore, she knew that her aunt loved her dearly. But Irene had left Oakdale to make a success and to wire now would only prove her failure. No, she would starve before she went to her aunt for aid. Something would surely intervene and save her that degrading

plea. Why, that would mean the shattering of her fondest dreams—a return to her aunt and Oakdale as a failure. Never, never in all the world would it voluntarily occur.

And then as she sat on her sealed trunk in her dingy hotel room and racked her mind for some plausible solution, a brilliant thought blossomed and came to her rescue. Several times in her initial year of experience, she had been cast by directors in minor musical comedy roles to portray the part of a child, perhaps for no better reason than her youthful appearance. Her hair was a chestnut shade and bobbed. Her eyes were a turquoise blue and deep as a jungle pool. A cherry-red mouth was precisely curved, while her flesh was milk-white in color and tinged with pink. When she smiled (which was often) she displayed a pair of dimples on genuinely crimson cheeks. In a bathing suit, Mack Sennett would have signed her on sight. Summing her up, or rather her appearance, it might be said that if beauty was desired she was everything anyone could possibly wish for.

So Irene was beset by the aforementioned brilliant idea and she lost no time in putting it into action. From the shabby recesses of her trunk she procured, after a diligent search, a child's dress which she had worn in a former production, and then following another aggravating search, the little flimsy things that go with it. A scrubbing with soap and water erased the traces of cosmetics from her flesh. Cotton stockings and Mary Jane pumps replaced silken hose and high-heel slippers on her shapely limbs and tiny feet. A huge satin hair-ribbon of baby blue formed a bow on her head. Then came white bloomers of lace, and finally the cute little organdy dress itself. A large red apple left over from her last meal gave to the collection an effect that is directorially known as the personal touch.

Less than one-half hour later a sweet little girl of perhaps ten or twelve stood before a window in a dinky rail-



road station and smiled upward at the inspecting gaze of a scowling ticket agent. For dramatic effect she took a huge bite out of a red apple in her hand.

"What's yer age?" the agent demanded, his eyes bulging behind their thick glasses.

"I'll be eleven in two weeks and five days."

"Want a one way ticket to San Francisco, do you?"

"Yes, sir, my mother lives there. I've been visiting grandma at the farm. Maybe you know her. She——"

"Seven dollars an' fifty cents; half fare," the agent cut her short and shoved a green slip through the cage. Irene counted out the sum, dollar by dollar, and was presently in possession of a much desired ticket. With childish gestures, she seated herself on a hard bench in the waiting annex and watched with interest the coming of a rain storm from the West.

Soon the patter of rain drops became audible and shortly afterwards the 'Frisco-bound express thundered up to the station. With a word of caution the agent assisted her up the steps and presently Irene passed down the aisle of a crowded day-coach. She found a vacant seat and moved over near the window where she watched the storm and smiled craftily to herself.

A vendor came down the narrow aisle and an old lady with a kind face and sweet smile called Irene a nice little girl and bought her a bag of peanuts. Irene displayed her appreciation by borrowing a newspaper from her, and in the pretense of reading the funny sheet, she freshened her mind on the theatrical column. Then down the swaying aisle came the uniformed conductor. He paused opposite Irene's seat and grinned.

"Well, well," he said, as Irene glanced up childishly, "quite a little girl to be travelin' alone, ain't you?" Irene handed him her ticket and smiled.



"I'm nearly eleven," she replied. "Once before when I was only nine I went from Phoenix to Los Angeles all alone. I'm not afraid." It was a reassuring sound to hear his clip-pers punch the ticket.

"You're a brave girlie. Now don't lose this stub," he handed her a punched slip, "and here's a nickel for you." It was hard for her to control a sigh of relief as he passed down the aisle to the adjoining coach.

The light rain had turned to a flooding torrent as the afternoon passed and now as the preliminary rays of dusk descended, Irene looked out the window at a dismal countryside. Presently the train drew to a halt at a small village not unlike the one from which she had recently departed. Outside on a muddy street a loud commotion became audible. It grew in volume and swelled until Irene pressed her nose against the rain dripping pane and stared. A strange sight met her gaze:

Running with obviously all the combined speed he could command, came a youngish appearing man. His straw hat was crushed over his ears. His flashy garments of dress were wringing wet and spattered with mud. His collar was torn off, and his necktie hung loosely about his neck. A battered suitcase dangled from his hand, while his left eye was bruised to a perfect charcoal color. With each leap his speed increased.

Following closely at a rapid pace in his uncertain wake, were what appeared to be a dozen or more leading citizens. From their mouths flowed angry threats and bitter curses, while bricks, and what seemed to Irene as small bottles, flew from their hands. With a splash the fleeing young man pitched headlong into a black puddle of mud. As he jumped to his feet and once more dashed for the steaming train, his straw hat and a bit of his scalp remained behind. One of the greatly annoyed leading citizens had evidently played baseball; anyway his aim had been perfect.

Tossing his suitcase ahead of him the young man leaped aboard the train as it slowly regained its momentum and chugged past the station. Presently he appeared in the aisle of Irene's coach and glanced the length of the car for a vacant seat. Hers was the only one and he quickly made his way toward it. Sliding his suitcase behind the partition, he flicked a clot of mud from the point of his nose and turned in a semicircle facing the throng of curious passengers that stared more or less bewildered at his undeniably humorous aspect.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said in a clear voice, addressing the crowded coach in general, but particularly the conductor who had suddenly emerged from the smoker, an angry gleam in his eyes, "you are at a loss, as I well understand, to grasp just what has occurred. To you, I undoubtedly appear as an ostracized vagabond, a scoundrel, an outcast. And far be it from me to blame you for this impression. I realize perfectly what an outrageous descension I have made in your calm midst. And, furthermore, I feel it my duty to at least offer an explanation—I leave it to your fair judgment as to the extent of my guilt or innocence." Hesitating to smile in a benevolent fashion, he stroked the shaded rim under his eye, but noting the stern expression on the conductor's countenance, quickly continued:

"Yes, friends, I feel I owe you an apology. The small town you have recently passed, as you perhaps know, is Bengate,—Bengate, California. I am its legal mayor by election, and in the past year I have tried my utmost to be a just and fair regulator of its policies. It is my humble birthplace and I love it with all my heart—the home of my father, my ancestors. But, friends, soon after my election last July, I realized that I had been put in a position of power by the leading citizens for a sinister purpose. I was

young and they thought I could be easily handled, more so than my political rival, so they shoved me with all their pull and I was elected.

“The inevitable occurred ; I refused flatly to listen to their crooked irrigation schemes, and after every attempt possible had been made to blacken my integrity and loyalty to the township, they set a deliberate trap and framed me. The outrageous scene you have so recently witnessed is the climax of their foul plans. Public sentiment has turned against me. I am ruined. Defeated because I attempted to uphold the law. Friends, that little town is my home, and before I allow a gang of land thieves to govern it, I will die fighting. That’s all there is to tell, folks. I don’t know how to thank you for your kind indulgence in listening to this ill fortune, but you may be sure I appreciate it. And when once again justice is supreme in Bengate, I’ll be only too glad to welcome any one of you into its realms. I thank you.”

With a condescending bow he smiled cheerily and retreated down the aisle to the smoker. It was apparent that he had won, not only the occupants of the coach to his side, but also the conductor, who shook his hand as he disappeared behind the door of the men’s compartment.

## CHAPTER II

Although he hardly favored her with a single glance, Irene stared with childlike eyes at the young mayor from his initial appearance. It was not only because he was an object to be stared at, but under the coating of mud he appeared to be a quite desirable chap. And also, she noticed, not bad to look at. His hair and eyes were dark, while his face was tanned to a healthy bronze. He was not too tall, as most heroes are, and not overly handsome. Although his smile was that of a college lad, there was something cynical about his face, something undefinable, which Irene was at a loss to place. She sympathized with him, and the plight his attempt at justice had snared him into aroused her ire. It was horrible to ruin his undoubtedly brilliant career when he was so young, she thought. But unlike her neighboring passengers, she did not give vocal vent to her feelings. As she listened, careful not to display too much interest, all she was able to overhear was praise for the ostracized mayor and scorn for the village of Bengate and its crooked citizens. For some reason she felt pleased that victory with the travelers had been his. And the thought that he was to sit beside her, was not without its merits.

The abrupt appearance of the conductor at the smoker door interrupted Irene's thoughts. He held up his hand for silence and all eyes in the coach riveted upon him.

"People," he said after a cough and brief pause, "you've heard Mayor Ralph Fenton's story. Forced as he was to leave his home without warning, he naturally came unprepared. Is there some gentleman in the car that will be kind enough to loan him a shirt and collar until he reaches the city? Mine are all too big or I'd gladly accommodate him."



He had barely concluded when several of the younger passengers were headed for the smoker with their grips. It was almost a race between them, so eager were they to aid the dethroned official. Again the thought of his victory with the travelers pleased Irene. She wished there was some way she might aid him. But, of course, being only a little eleven year old girl made it quite impossible, ridiculous in fact. Perhaps though, destiny—who could tell?

A hushed silence swept over the coach as once again the door to the smoker swung open. Followed by the conductor and the several young men that had so willingly come to his aid, emerged Mayor Ralph Fenton, late of Bengate. His features were cleansed of the mud, as were his garments. Not only did he wear a fresh shirt and collar, but one of his new acquaintances had insisted on the acceptance of a silk handkerchief, while still another had donated an extra straw hat. He paused at the head of the aisle and bit his lip as though to control surging emotions. As he spoke his eyes dimmed and there came feeling in his words.

“Friends,” he began, “I don’t know how to thank you. I probably never will be able to. But from the bottom of my heart I appreciate your kindness even more than you can possibly imagine. You’ve been wonderful—just wonderful.”

With that, tears wet his dark eyes and he wiped them away with the recently acquired handkerchief. Then he shook the hands of his benefactors, one by one, and praised the conductor to the skies for his priceless assistance. A moment later he patted Irene tenderly on her chestnut hair, and seated himself with a cheerful smile beside her.

Their conversation began almost instantly, at his instigation, and Irene found the young mayor very easy to talk with. Although she chose her words with diligent care, it was difficult to refrain from expressing her real thoughts, and several times she nearly erred.

"I don't understand much about it," she said with an attempt at youthful seriousness, knocking her knees together and playfully toying with the nickel the conductor had given her, "but I feel awfully sorry for you, mister. Did those mean men hurt you?"

"No, little girl," he replied, "but they would have if they'd caught me. They were mad."

"How long do you suppose your eye will stay black?" she fingered her own smooth flesh in kiddish horror.

"Nearly a week, I guess."

"Do you think beefsteak would help it? My father got kicked by a pig once, so ma told me, and that's what he put on it."

"I doubt it. But let's talk about something cheerful, Miss—Miss——"

"Irene Dare. Everybody calls me Dot at home. Why don't you call me Dot?"

"From now on I most certainly will, Dot."

"Gee, I do feel sorry for you, Mister Mayor. And if it wasn't for your eye you'd be so handsome. I like handsome men. So does mother, but pa says they're too soft and mushy. I don't believe him, though. Do you?"

"Well, it's hard to state definitely, Dot. They're not all alike. But you must call me Ralph if you want me to call you Dot. And now here comes the porter announcing dinner, so you be a nice little girlie, and we'll dine together. Will you allow me?"

He rose to his feet and offered his arm. Reluctantly Irene slid from the seat and blushed. Then she gave him her most wistful look, and locked her slender arm in the curve of his.

"This is awfully dandy of you, Mister Ralph," she declared as they passed down the aisle followed by approving glances from the throng of passengers, "I like you. When

I grow up I'm gonna marry a man like you. If I were old enough, and pretty and sweet, would you marry me?"

He grinned broadly and pinched her caressingly on the crimson of her cheek. The car lurched and Irene thrilled, as in steadying her, his hands clasped gently on her slender arms.

"Any man in the world would be honored to marry such a wonderful little lady as you'll be some day," he replied. "I'm almost tempted to wait," he added with a laugh. Irene liked his reply, but the laugh was not so becoming.

In the beginning she had not considered the humorous aspect of their swiftly developed friendship, but now that the fun had started, she could not resist the provocation to further such delightful humor.

Perhaps too, she thought, it would relieve his worried mind of the troubles that no doubt swamped it. She had wanted to aid him in what was undoubtedly his crisis; here was evidently the opportunity.

It was the most appetizing meal Irene had enjoyed since leaving Aunt Celia's table at Oakdale. Her host ordered for both with reckless and assiduously correct profusion, and his conversation, or rather his answers to her questions, held her in a continual suspense of merriment. Of course she secreted her enjoyment under a mask of childish gestures, and girlish moods, but that only served to make it more intriguing, and once it was all she could do to control her emotions.

When the filet mignon was served, the late mayor insisted on dissecting Irene's portion, so she sat back as he carved, a smile on her red lips, a bright twinkle in her turquoise eyes. And when she jerked her fingers away from a warm plate and said she had burned them, he took her small hand in the palm of his own and comforted her tenderly. A sensation swept through Irene such as she had never previously ex-



perienced. For a brief moment she vaguely wondered if she were falling in love. No, she felt sorry for him—that was it, she decided, and put the thought out of her mind.

How utterly ridiculous to fall in love with a man she had known hardly more than an hour; a stranger who thought her a mere child, and who had undoubtedly been kind to her for no other reason than the fact that the passengers in the coach would expect such conduct from a public official such as he. Or possibly she had helped erase the shadow of his misfortune. Anyway, the thought that she was falling in love was beyond reason. She giggled and purposely spilled a bit of her salad on the table-cloth.

The negro waiter placed a heaping plate of ice cream before her. Irene eyed it for a moment, her forehead wrinkled in disgust. "Mister Ralph," she declared, pouting, "I think it's a shame to let them give me such a small dish. I simply adore ice cream. Don't you?" With a curt instruction he doubled the order. Then he patted her hand and grinned.

"Anything that's not just right," he said, "you tell Uncle Ralph and he'll get it, or know the reason why."

Dinner finished, they retreated to the coach, and now as the train rambled through a dark gloomy night, they sat side by side and chatted in a pleasant vein. Although she denied it even to herself, Irene knew down deep in her heart that the young mayor made a tremendous appeal to her. And he, himself, seemed to be enjoying her presence not a little. But of course, she sighed, he only thought her a little girl and that took all the romance out of it in a flash. Perhaps if she unfolded her secret to him he would really care for her. No, that would never do. To him she was a mere child, and as such she would have to remain.

"If I were a man, when I grew up I'd be mayor like you are," Irene declared with kiddish gusto, "sure I would. But I'm only a girl, so I guess there's nothing else for me to be



but a dancer. I dance awfully nice, Mister Ralph; do you?"

"Occasionally I risk it," he replied, laughing. "But I can't say I'm a marvel. I'd like very much to see you dance, though. I'll bet on a polished floor you're just wonderful."

"You bet I am. And when I grow up and am a pretty lady, I'm going on the stage and be the best dancer in the world. I practice every day and everybody says I have awfully cute legs for a dancer. Do you think my legs are cute?"

Irene slid her organdy dress above her dimpled knees and displayed her shapely limbs. "Feel how firm they are," she added, hardly able to control her laughter. "That comes from dancing every day."

Embarrassed, the young mayor blushed to a scarlet. "Yes," he replied, attempting to conceal his discomfort, "they are pretty. Now put down your dress, Dot. Here comes the candy man and we're gonna have some nice chocolates."

After Irene had selected an array of candy and fruit, to say nothing of several packages of chewing-gum, her newly acquired acquaintance dismissed the vendor and they were again alone. From her blue eyes she stared at him with child-like adoration—the awe of youth for age, and under her direct gaze he slightly wavered. After a long silence she favored him with the sweetest smile she could command.

"You're the nicest man I've ever known," she declared. "I wish I was old enough to be your wife. You're so handsome I bet all the other ladies would want to take you away from me. I wouldn't let them, though, would I?" The opportunity offered such unlimited chance for concealed humor that Irene could not resist the temptation.

He turned and gazed down in her blue eyes. An ex-

pression of annoyed befuddlement clouded his face. Carefully he noted her childish garments of dress.

"How old are you, Dot?" he casually inquired, his dark eyes hovering from her rounded bosom to her trim ankles.

"I'm nearly eleven," she answered, a trace of fear in her eyes, for she realized she had gone a bit too far in her last question. "In another year I'll have to pay full fare to ride on the train. Just think, Mister Ralph, twice as much. Oh, look! I can see the lights of the city already. We must almost be there!" A change of topic was paramount, she realized.

"Yes, Dot. Twenty minutes more and we'll be at Third and Townsend." If he had suspected her the thought had apparently vanished. "Do you intend to stay in 'Frisco long?" he added. "Perhaps your mother will allow me to take you riding in Lincoln Park. I won't be there for over a week myself. Just long enough to mass my evidence against those mean men who chased me. But you can telephone me at the St. Francis Hotel, if you'd like to, and we'll go for a dandy ride."

"Gee, that's awfully nice of you, Mister Ralph. But I don't know how long we're going to stay in the city. And besides, mother is always so terribly busy I never get to go anywhere. But if she'll let me, I surely will."

She might have been mistaken but it seemed to Irene that her inability to accept his invitation prompted the young mayor to utter a soft sigh of relief. That presented a new and distinctly annoying problem. She concentrated on it.

At the Third and Townsend Street Terminal, after again thanking his benefactors for their charitable aid and praising the conductor, the ostracized mayor of Bengate bade Irene a fond farewell and after pinching her cheek tenderly and caressing her little hand, he was lost in the vast throng.

As she boarded a trolley with the intention of finding a

room, Irene suddenly realized that he had not repeated his kind invitation for a ride in Lincoln Park. Had he seen through her mask, she vaguely wondered, and thought her a trickster? Or was he just bored? That was undoubtedly it—he was bored with her childish company. She had disturbed him, rather than soothed him in his crisis. That had been mean of her, she realized, and wondered if there was some way in which she could repay.

Somehow she seemed so lonely as she sat there in the clattering trolley, as though her last friend in the world had departed. But that was foolishness, she told herself. How could she possibly care for a person she hardly knew. As soon as she found a place to live and saw her booking-agent, she would feel better. It wasn't him she missed, it was just plain ornery loneliness.

### CHAPTER III

The offices of the notorious Smooth Face Salve Co. are far from elaborately conspicuous, but they are always crowded by busy out-of-town salesmen and cigar smoking officials of the firm. Its important revenue is derived from the small villages where a credulous population rely on doubtful statements, to-wit: "Smooth Face Salve will, without fail, stop the growth of facial beards after a single week of continuous applications." Usually the traveling distributor takes the precaution of vanishing before the week has ended. Some don't. Ralph Fenton, alias the Mayor of Bengate, was one who didn't.

With his battered suitcase in hand, he strode briskly into the Company office and finally to the private den of the tobacco chewing manager. Startled by the abrupt entree, the official glared at him through black rimmed spectacles.

"I quit!" yelled Ralph, slamming his suitcase down on a polished desk, "I quit, now and forever! Look at me, you lummo, you bum beard stopper! See my eye? Well, take a look at the chunk that's missing from my dome! What happened? You have the nerve to ask me? Why your damn rotten junk that you call Beard Salve didn't work, as you knew it wouldn't. But you didn't tell me that, did you? No, you showed me a stack of forged testimonials from would-be clients. And I fell like a rock for your dirty gag. What happened? Why, you poor simp, I stayed right there in Bengate for eight days, after selling two hundred bottles, and when the stuff didn't stop the growth of beards, and a druggist tested it and found it to be cheap cold cream, they ran me out of town! Threw bricks and some of your lousy bottles at me! Humiliated me before a coach full of pas-



sengers! I had to lie till I was blue in the face! And I thought I had a good job selling a legitimate product. If I had any political pull in this town I'd put you in the can for life, you small-time robber! But here's what I'm gonna do, get me? And not a word out of you or I'll take my story to the nearest newspaper for publication. Now listen!"

Unlocking his suitcase which was partly filled with small brown bottles, Ralph jerked out a soiled order pad and swiftly turned to a definite page. The dazed manager spat out his wad of odorous tobacco and stood motionless, his frame quivering under the sudden assault, his expression one of mingled fear and astonishment.

"Get your stenographer!" commanded Ralph, "and be quick about it!" When his demand had been complied with and a woman entered, pad in hand, he handed her a long list of names and addresses.

"Put these names and addresses on separate envelopes," he ordered, "and stamp them—ready for mailing. You may go now." Then he faced the suddenly meek manager. "You sit yourself down at that desk and get out your check book, or I'll phone the *Chronicle*. Understand?" His fist banged the desk.

Reluctantly, trembling and pleading, the manager complied. Pen in hand he paused for Ralph's next word. Cold beads of perspiration wet his brow. His fingers trembled.

"Make out," Ralph commanded, "two hundred checks, each for a dollar and fifty cents. Make 'em out to cash—and sign 'em, get me?"

"Yes, Mister," was the only reply Ralph received, as the quivering manager began to write. When he finally finished and signed the last of the bulky stack, the stenographer entered with the stamped envelopes. She placed them on the desk at Ralph's instruction and disappeared.

Ralph shook a pointed finger under the manager's arched nose, an angry gleam sparkling in his eyes. The official melted to a listless pulp of quivering flesh. He hardly breathed.

"Now give me a signed receipt for three hundred dollars cash," he demanded, "and make out a personal check to me for fifty dollars expense money. Be quick about it!" While the manager meekly complied, Ralph slipped the checks in their envelopes and sealed them one by one. Binding the stack together with a rubber band and shoving it away in an inner pocket, he produced a wallet, and from its interior displayed a stack of currency. Under his count it balanced even three hundred dollars. Selecting fifty dollars he shoved it back in his wallet. The remainder he handed to the manager.

"My commission," he said. Then he took the check and receipt and strode to the doorway, where he paused.

"If you try to stop payment on these checks I'm returning to the people you've buncoed," he cried, shaking a clenched fist, "I'll go to the press with my story and they'll run you out of town, you low sneaking cheat!"

The door slammed with a crash on his retreating figure, and the exhausted manager sank to his chair with a bewildered sigh. "Three hundred dollars refunded," he groaned. "And a hundred more to him! My God—such business—Oui!"

## CHAPTER IV

The Midway Casino is a cafe and restaurant. Notorious it was in the old days, but with the advent of prohibition, it fell from grace until now nothing remains but the ashes of its old-time Barbary coast atmosphere. It occupies the large cement basement and main floor of an aged brick building on Pacific Street, not far from the Columbus Avenue intersection. In its gaudy realms, the elite of the Bay City underworld makes merry each night from nine till dawn. Men about town swagger into its more or less respectable portals, when they leave their clubs on the two o'clock round. Cake-eaters dot its numerous tables and watch the nightly musical comedy performance. Here and there in the smoke clouded hall one finds a tourist or a slumming party, bent on seeing the famous quarter. And one invariably finds that pompous individual, Rufus Gunning, political boss of the underworld, enjoying his exaggerated glory at a ring-side table.

The cuisine is fair, the bootleg worse. Its habitués remain faithful and pitifully attempt to keep up its reputation. It prides itself on a "Frolic Revue," each night from ten till two, when one may feast on a delicious row of curveful legs, bare shoulders, and be forced to hear voices that are frightful, in payment of their patronage.

For the initial two weeks, Irene Dare, doing her single, "That Kid From Madrid," thought she would not be able to stand the disgusting routine. The atmosphere was nauseating, the patrons were for the most part vulgar, and collectively, she hated the Midway's very idea. But her salary was larger here than she had ever previously earned, and she had the entire day to forget, so she stuck on, hoping against hope that her agent would be able to find her a better troupe,

which was extremely doubtful, for the theatrical game was on a decided slump, and many old-timers were stranded.

She had hardly made a single acquaintance with the other girls in the Revue and her only friend was Loko, the clown pantomimist, who dressed in the room adjoining hers. He was a freak, she thought, but unlike the other girls she called him by name, and not the "nut" as was their usual habit. He was tall, six feet three at the least, and crowned by a small tow-head. It was clean shaven like his lean face and shone when under the rays of scenery light. He was so slender, he impressed one as being nothing but a collection of loose, angular bones. When he danced his grotesque number, it was almost impossible to comprehend his action and gestures. His hearing was marvelously developed, but he was hopelessly dumb. He danced to music that was as weird as his own appearance, and when the applause came—as it always did for he was quite a favorite—he laughed a gurgling monotone down deep in his throat. And that was the only sound anyone had ever heard him utter.

One night after the performance, Irene was disturbed by a knock on her door and when she opened it, Loko stood posed in the arch. He had not removed his pale corpse-like make-up, although his gaudy clown costume hung over an angular arm. With sparkling jet eyes he spoke to her. An opened letter was gripped in his lean fingers.

Irene was not long in grasping the meaning of his interruption. He wanted the letter read to him. When they were seated, she unfolded it and began. It was dated three weeks previous in a small French province. With pantomimical gestures he explained that until now, he had never been able to get anyone to read it for him—with perfect expressions and superb acting, he cleverly explained that they had all been too busy.

Her sympathy aroused, Irene was not long in forming a



friendship with the strange character. Occasionally she read newspapers to him in the afternoons, following a rehearsal. Once he brought her a small gift, and on another occasion when a cake-eater announced himself at her dressing-room door following the show, he mysteriously appeared and it needed only a single glance from his vivid eyes to cause the intruder to beat a hasty retreat. She thanked him, and he grinned. And in that grin Irene recognized the lines of emotions, deep and passionate.

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To those who knew him intimately (they were few to be sure), Rufus Gunning was a weak, unprincipled four-flusher. But to those who pointed him out as the great political boss of the Barbary Coast quarter, he appeared as an iron-fisted monarch. With him everything began and ended with bluff. He was a devoted worshiper at its frail shrine—a little god in the land of bull.

Twenty per cent of the profits of the Midway Casino went into his pockets, while *carte blanche* in the hall was always his. He usually had his pick of the chorus girls too—but when he spied Irene one night during the second week of her engagement, and was introduced to her by Monsieur Gene Suttle, the owner and proprietor of the Casino, he met his first rebuff. She greeted him politely enough—but that was all, and the political boss was annoyed not a little.

“She’s beautiful,” he repeated as he watched her dancing from a near-by table. “Seems to have good sense. I’ve shown I like her—what can be wrong? The other girls in the troupe welcome the opportunity of a night with me. What in damnation is wrong with this dame?” He gave it up with a sigh and had the suave manager fix him a date with Mable, “that blonde skirt—third from the left, in the front row,” as he put it.

Now Gene Suttle, the proprietor of the notorious hall, was an enemy of the political boss, and Rufus, himself, knew this quite well. But he did not fear the dark complexioned Gene, in the least; far from it. He never feared anyone over whom he held a net of incriminating evidence. And the smooth Gene was tight in his grasp. Raw opium and illicit narcotics had been sold in the Midway, and Rufus knew just where the body was buried. It meant twenty years in a Federal Prison for Gene, if Rufus chose to put him there, and this Gene feared. But as long as a share of the profits were Rufus', and he was given free run of the place, far be it from him to undermine his income and pleasure.

Thus it was that they existed, side by side, night after night, and tolerated each other with calm indifference. Every desire Rufus expressed, which was within reason, Gene satisfied. Every favor he requested was complied with. He dined like a king and signed the cheque—never to see it again. He selected his girls from the chorus and Gene did his best to produce. Glory and fame as the power of the tenderloin was his. Rufus Gunning reigned supreme and boisterously happy. A queer contrast with the undersized and brooding proprietor, who sat depressed and sulked at the side of his bulky nemesis.

## CHAPTER V

In a city the population of San Francisco, one hundred dollars in the support of even a single individual will not go very far, and two weeks from the date of his abrupt resignation as an out-of-town salesman for the Smooth Face Salve Co., found Ralph Fenton with less than twenty dollars in his pockets, and a delinquent hotel bill, due in three days.

It didn't worry Ralph, though; he always seemed to get along somehow, sometimes better than other times, as is the way with most of us, but always he got along, which is what really matters, after all. He was gifted with a priceless ability to talk—talk fast, furious and perfect. Therefore he made an excellent salesman, but somehow he hated the thought of it. It seemed to him he should have been a lot higher up in the world than he was. Of course he realized that life on his own hook had struck him rather unawares—for only four years previous he had left college for the war, returned home wounded, and found his father dead. And then, instead of coming into a vast inheritance as he had expected, he made the startling discovery that his father had died in debt. It had taken a year to pay off those debts—a year of hard gruelling labor when his wounds should have been healing. But Ralph was determined, and when once he set his mind on a course of action, nothing could halt him.

The debts paid, his father's honor upheld, Ralph pilgrimaged from his native home in the state of New York to the border city of El Paso. For a while he tried ranching—but somehow he didn't seem to fit. Then he moved to Los Angeles and took a shot at the real estate game, but it was the wrong part of the year for Eastern suckers, so he finally

gave it up and went North. At Fresno he managed a bean ranch, but no advance above his present position was possible, so he quit. San Francisco found him flat broke and the Smooth Face Salve Co. proved a fortunate life saver. It would do till he got on his feet again, he decided, so he took a fling with the afore-mentioned result.

Ralph knew perfectly well that somewhere there was something that would just exactly fit his uncertain capacity; a position or situation that would lift him above the throng—make him—and he was contented to search until he found it. What it was he hadn't the least idea; but that eventually he would find it, he never for an instant doubted.

The present predicament must be faced, he realized. He must have money, which meant work. But jobs were scarce in the Bay City and positions even more so. To be exact he tried several vocations he knew nothing about, and was speedily fired, which bothered him not a bit for it had occurred too many times previous. So now as he strode down Market Street, wandering aimlessly, for he had nothing better to do, he was suddenly beset with a bright idea. Perhaps the Child's restaurant he paused in front of at the time, had something to do with the thought. Anyway, it occurred to him that he would make a wonderful waiter. Why not, he asked himself as he watched an immaculately-white chef flop steaming hot cakes over a sizzling range? His favorite pastime, when not chasing rainbows or building imaginary castles, leaned in the direction of food, and no matter how lowering the profession of a waiter might be, it was nearer the kitchen than a bread-line. And then, too, perhaps the day would come when the famous Ralph Fenton Cafe's, Inc., would circle the globe. There was no limit to the marvelous possibilities such employment offered. So Ralph turned about and retraced his steps up Market, keeping a sharp look-out for an employment bureau.



It never occurred to him that to be a first-class waiter one must be skilled at the task. He had decided to be a waiter and as far as he was concerned he was—that he would be unable to hold such a position never even entered his mind. At that moment it happened to be brimming over with dreams of the Ralph Fenton Cafe's, Inc., and the pancake shuffling chef.

\* \* \*

In a private chamber on the balcony of the Midway Casino, the quarters reserved for the proprietor, Gene Suttle, an argument was reaching heated proportions. With oily black hair and expressionless eyes he leaned across the narrow table as a sneer twisted his dry lips—Gene at his worst.

Irene drew back nauseated. His very appearance repulsed her, and his direct insinuations were terrifying almost beyond endurance.

“Now listen, honey,” he crooned, sliding his dark hand closer to Irene's, and attempting to assume a benevolent expression, “let's quit this argument. You and I can get along smooth together, if you'll only get some sense an' listen to reason. I like yer act, and so does the audience. Yer going over great. But what I'm offerin' you will make you a headliner. I'll double yer salary. Give you a swamp of advertising. Let you lead the chorus, or any damn thing you want. But, honey, I want you to be good to me an' pay some attention to Mr. Rufus Gunning. Why, kid, it's an honor that he'd even talk to you. He's our most promising politician down here on the lane. Can't tell but what he'll be mayor some day. He's a great man, an' he likes you. You've got him going, honey. He's soft as mush on you. Is it a go? You have dinner with Rufus after the show, or get your last pay in the mornin'.”

It was no temptation for Irene. Her mind had been made up from the first. There was always Aunt Celia to turn to,

and before she would lower herself to the level of a greasy political boss, she would forget the theatre forever. The very thought of him with his moist chalky features, his fat body, and bald head was repulsive to her. From occasional phrases dropped by the other girls in the troupe, she learned he was worse than she even feared to imagine. A certain blonde, Mable by name, was now in the hospital with severe injuries due to his brutal treatment, while his vulgar after-show orgies were common talk. At the thought of him for a companion, Irene grew weak and faint; never, never in the world would she condescend. It would be Oakdale and Aunt Celia first.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Suttle," she replied, rising from the table and turning slightly toward the door that led to the balcony, "but your request is impossible. Mr. Gunning is probably a very nice man, but at present I'm refraining from all social affairs. So tonight will be my last performance. I've enjoyed my engagement, and also my popularity, immensely. And I'm very sorry that it comes to such a climax as this. Good night, Mr. Suttle. You may expect me in the morning for my salary."

With that, Irene turned on her heels and started for the door. Like a snarling animal, the proprietor leaped past her and blocked her passage. He leaned back against the balcony door, his arms folded across his chest, a menacing grin twisting his face.

"Just a minute, honey," he said. "No hurry, you've got company. May I present the Hon. Rufus Gunning?" and then in the next breath, "Oh, you don't want to see him? Well, you're gonna see him!"

A door on the far side of the room abruptly swung open and the bulky political boss stepped out of a small closet.

"Greetings," he cried, as he swiftly advanced, "my good friends. Or shall I say, friend, for I've just decided that

our fair dancer fails to care for me. Maybe a little persuasion will change her views. Who knows, eh, Gene?"

Irene fully realized the futility of screaming for aid; there would be only the henchmen of Gene to hear, or gangsters controlled by the political boss. The balcony was a forbidden realm and very rarely did the members of the show visit it. And even among them, who would dare to interfere?

"Please, Mr. Suttle," Irene pleaded, "allow me to leave. You made me an unfair offer. I have refused. Now be kind enough to excuse me."

His answer was a snickering laugh. Then the grinning Rufus brushed the proprietor aside, and sunk his fat fingers in the tender flesh of her shoulder.

"Be a nice dearie," he growled, "and you'll not get hurt. I'm gonna be about the best daddy you ever had—so you might as well calm down. But if you don't ——," the last was obviously a threat.

Precisely at this critical moment, a very loud knock sounded on the panel of the balcony door and interrupted the icy phrase. Both Gene and Rufus riveted their eyes on each other, and stood motionless. Irene contemplated the effect of a scream. Then the knock sounded again, this time louder than before. Gene shifted nervously. Rufus loosened his fingers from Irene's shoulder. Then for the third time the rapping sounded. It was presently followed by a determined twisting of the brass knob.

Rousing himself, Gene motioned Rufus and Irene to one side. Then he unsnapped the latch and turned the knob. Irene held her ground, determined to flee if opportunity offered. The door swung open.

Poised, calm and serene in the oblong frame, stood Loko, the clown pantomimist. A cynical smile curved his lips. He bowed, gurgled something inaudible in his throat,



and advanced a single step. Then, before Rufus or Gene were able to intervene, or in fact comprehend his movement, he offered his angular arm to Irene and escorted her swiftly out of the chamber and down the balcony toward the stage. Dumfounded, the bulky political boss and his brooding enemy, stared at each other in blank amazement.

"My God!" they exclaimed simultaneously. "What the hell made us let that nut get away with that?" Neither cared to admit that a strange sparkle burned in the dumb pantomimist's eyes. A jet sparkle that was in itself a warning—they were both aware of that.

Murmuring her gratitude, although she quivered from the excitement of the narrow escape, Irene clung tightly to her rescuer's arm until the door of her dingy dressing room was closed behind them. Then, lighting a gas jet, she sank in a chair exhausted. Presently the realization that there was some one else in the room came to her. Loko nodded toward the couch and pointed a long finger.

Frightened, Irene quickly turned about and her eyes rested on a young girl with blond hair, whom she instantly recognized as Mable, one of the chorus. The girl smiled and came forward. She walked slowly and leaned against the wall for support.

"Of course, Loko couldn't tell you," she said. "But I'll explain. You probably know I've been in a hospital because I was crazy enough to go out with that dirty rat, Rufus Gunning. Well, I got out this afternoon and I've come down here to see him. I was sittin' in the main hall and he passed me up like I was smoke. I watched him though, dearie, and I saw him and Gene talkin' together for a long time after you went to your room. Then I saw Rufus beat it for the private balcony, and Gene knock on your door. I knew Rufus was sweet on you—as all us girls do—so I guessed there was somethin' up. When you followed Gene in the



room where Rufus had gone, I knew it. You didn't come out, and I knew what happened to me, so I got worried. Then Loko came along and I told him. He did the rest. I came down here to hide till the show's over. Then I'm gonna see Rufus. He'll pay my doctor bill or I'll know the reason why."

"How can I ever repay you?" Irene declared. "If it hadn't been for you, I've no doubt——."

"Aw, don't bother to thank me, dearie," the girl interrupted. "You'd have done the same for me. And besides I'm not so strong for that pair of cut-throats, anyway. I'd like to see 'em both behind the bars. Thank Loko here—he's the bird that got you out."

"I do thank him, and I realize I owe you both more than I can ever pay. And I'm terribly sorry about your injuries; is there anything I can do? Anything at all?"

"There sure is!" the girl eagerly replied. "Let me hide here till the show's over. If Gene sees me, he's liable to run me out, and I've gotta see Rufus, I've just gotta, that's all."

"You're entirely welcome to stay as long as you like," Irene declared. "And now, Loko," she faced the tall clown, who had listened alertly to their conversation, his lean face hovering from one to the other, his brow corrugated in simple thought, "if you'll excuse us, I'll make myself ready for my last performance in the Frolic Revue. And thanks a hundred times for what you've done, tonight. You know I appreciate it, and I'll see you again before I leave."

Smiling from ear to ear, the dumb pantomimist bowed with a broad gesture and departed. At the door he hesitated and shot an appealing glance at Irene. Then he was gone.

"How the devil do you stand that nut, dearie?" Mable demanded. "He's enough to drive a person bugs. I guess he comes in handy at times, though. He played the life saver tonight, all right. No tellin' what Gene and Rufus would have done to you if he hadn't butted in. They're bad eggs, bad as they make 'em. From now on, I'm off these Pacific Street dumps, and dearie, take my advice—play an up-town theatre or nothin'."

## CHAPTER VI

It was a great night for the Midway. The Casino was jammed to the roof, and tables not used in many years, were dusted off and brought into play. Submerged with the overflow and prompted by an annual convention of good-fellows from all over America, who were seeing the famous old quarter, the proprietor worked himself into an excited frenzy, and telephoned far and wide for waiters. A contingent arrived on the fly from an up-town bureau that ran their office hours late into the night, and were immediately sent to the kitchen for outfits of dress clothes. Then, as rapidly as they appeared, they were assigned to various tables where food-craving patrons cried aloud for nourishment.

The idea of being rushed about from one table to another and hence to an odorous kitchen where Chinese cooks and greasy Filipino boys yelled orders in your ears and shoved heaping trays of steaming foods in your arms, hardly appealed to Ralph in the light he had contemplated. But his twenty dollars had swiftly diminished and down in his heart he knew the Ralph Fenton Cafes, Inc., would be a great success; so when the call came for temporary waiters and the bureau telephoned him at his hotel, he strode into the new job as though he were a conquering knight in virgin domains. Then he stumbled with a tray and woke. A severe cursing was his penalty, and he was reassigned to a table in the rear of the hall where the gangsters and dock laborers usually gathered. He didn't mind them so much as he did the lavender tinted chap who kept making eyes at him.

He had never cared for the color anyway, and the dimpled chap was surely a study in it. But then at the Midway one finds every kind—from University students to safe crackers, and all the degrees that come between.

At their usual table, a little to one side but close enough to the footlights for a distinct view, sat the sulking Gene and the pompous Rufus. A cigar, fat like himself, protruded from the latter's thick lips. His eyes bulged wide as his moist fist hit the table to accentuate his words.

"Get me, Gene?" he growled, chewing his cigar until tobacco juice trickled over his chin. "No more stalls! I'm damn near through. Do you know what that means? Do you realize? It means that you're gonna visit a Federal pen for about twenty years; and it means that I'm gonna get credit for breakin' up the biggest gang of hop peddlers in the West, and election ain't so very far off, you know. You've stalled me too long. I've taken about enough. And your not bein' able to get that dame a little while ago cinches it! You let a skinny nut take her right out of my hands. Fine specimen, you turned out to be!"

"Aw, Rufus, not so tough on me," Gene forgot his brooding long enough to plead. "I ain't so bad as that. If you want the skirt that much, I'll get her for you. You sure must be hot on her. Ain't never seen you act this way before. But for the love of God, let up on that hop stuff, somebody might overhear you. And besides, you ain't got no kick. I give you twenty per cent, free grub, and everything you want. And if this Irene dame will keep you quiet, I'll get her for you. I'll get her if I have to knock her cold. Is it a bet?"

"Get that girl for me, and get her tonight and I'll shut my trap," Rufus replied, spitting out his cigar and assuming a benevolent expression. "But if you fail to deliver, I'll start talking, and when I do you'll be inside lookin' out, get me?"

"You needn't worry, Rufus," Gene interrupted with a condescending gesture. "The skirt is the same as yours. After the show meet me backstage at the stairs what lead



to the dressing rooms. She's gotta come out that way—and, well, I've a little plan I think will stop her. Here, Rufus," this came with a forced smile, "have a drink on me. Straight shall I make it, or a little ale?"

"Ale," Rufus replied, turning about and viewing the hall with a circling gaze. "Sure got a mob, tonight, Gene."

"Mob is right. I had to get extra waiters, dig up old tables, an' put on a new bouncer. Convention in town—I guess they'd rather get stung here, on what's left of the old Coast, than up-town. I've been billing the Revue purty heavy the last week, too. That may help account for the jam." A pause, then, "Here, Rufus, I'm a drink ahead of you. Give me your glass." Rufus complied.

With a syncopated flare from a negro jazz band the curtain lifted on the small stage at the end of the hall, and from each wing there filed into the bright lights a column of girls in very abbreviated costumes. From an arbor in the scenery a young man appeared and led the rather pretty number with a popular song. Then the chorus danced off, and the orchestra began a weird harmonious melody that was somehow remindful of an Indian war dance.

From a black velvet drop, Loko darted, his make-up chalk white, his skin-tight costume a blood scarlet. With a twirling gesture he spun in the air and dropped to his knees. Then as only a pantomimist can, he enacted a cleverly exaggerated comedy without words. His portrayal of the various characters was unique; each gesture, each movement, a word. When finally the curtain dropped, the huge audience applauded him wildly. With a barely audible gurgle he thanked them. Then, bowing deeply, he vanished in the wings, and the show went on.

In the meantime, as the Frolic Revue progressed, and Rufus and Gene guzzled drink after drink, and the substitute waiter, Ralph Fenton, Esq., stumbled from the kitchen



to his tables, Mable, late of the chorus, chatted with Irene as the latter waited her number. They were still in the dressing room. Irene had garbed herself in a Spanish costume of bright colors, and now she poised with tambourine in hand before a tall mirror, while Mable looked on in envious admiration.

"Now don't forget, dearie, what I've been tellin' you," Mable cautioned. "You go back home and stay there if you can't play good houses. I've tried these dumps, these side street dives, and what has it got me? I'm a has-been. Just a dizzy blonde, and I'm wise enough to know it. More still, I'm wise enough to get out while the gettin's good."

"I do appreciate your advice," Irene replied, dabbing the finishing touches on her make-up. "And this is my last performance here, thank the Lord. If my agent is unable to book me in vaudeville or an up-town theatre, it's home for me. Although I do want to make a success, and I've tried so hard that the thought of failure just sickens me. Nevertheless, I'll go home rather than endure any more of this."

"That's the way to talk, dearie. Give 'em the gate. And I'm with you. After I pay my little visit to Rufus, and collect my bill, it's good night chorus for me. I'll get a job squirting soda, or something. But nix on the gay life of a half starved show tramp, an' that's what this game has made me." Mable smiled grimly, and shifted the lump of gum in her mouth from one jowl to the other. Irene smoothed the lines from her silk hose, and glanced at the wrist-watch on the dressing table.

"Must be nearly time," she said, "for my——." A knock on the door interrupted her. "Miss Irene Dare," a voice called, "time for your act."

The orchestra took up her number as she scampered down the runway toward the stage, leaving Mable alone in her dressing room. Loko stood by the wings and smiled at her,

as the stage manager gave her the cue and she danced out in a silver spotlight before the crowded hall. A light applause greeted her. Then, with a clicking of her castanets, she began her dance, and the audience hushed and settled down to judge the performance.

While Rufus from his ring-side table nudged Gene with his bulky arm and a glowing desire burned in his small eyes, and while Loko from the edge of the wings steadied his jet gaze on the dancing figure in the spotlight, another vastly interested individual stopped dead in his tracks and stared dumbfounded with eyes that refused to believe.

A heaping tray balanced on the palm of his hand, Ralph stared and stared and stared until his gaze blurred and the bright stage revolved in dim circles and the dancing figure in the gay Spanish costume was no more than a staggering speck. A mass of conflicting thoughts clouded his mind until functioning was out of the question. It couldn't be! It couldn't be! something kept telling him. And yet as he pulled himself together and stared anew, he was certain. Yes, there was no mistaking—it was Dot! The eleven-year-old child, the pretty little girl that had been so sweet, and asked him so many embarrassing questions. Impossible! But there she was, dancing in all her splendor! She had fooled him, played with his emotions, and lied—but why?

In a flash his career as a waiter ended. He was now a detective working to solve a vast problem, and from her gorgeous appearance, a delightful one, too. Headed for the kitchen, a fellow waiter passed him. With a swift movement, Ralph shoved his tray of foodstuffs in the man's fumbling hands.

"Your grub," he said. "I brought 'em out to help you. Union rule number six: 'Help your fellow waiter.'"

In an instant he had gone, headed in a winding course toward a side wall. Bewildered the waiter looked about him

in a helpless manner. Then, mumbling a curse, he started for Ralph's table with the orders.

Reaching a shadowed position beneath the balcony where the brightly hued lights of the gaudy hall were somewhat dimmed, Ralph stayed his swift progress and made himself as inconspicuous as possible. This was an easy thing to do, for practically everyone in the audience watched the fawn-like figure that danced the dance of early California, under the misleading title, of course—"That Kid From Madrid." Ralph was too deep under the spell of his sudden discovery, too amazed, and far too bewildered, to note any discrepancies in title or dance. For no apparent reason, she had played the role of a child, mislead him, together with a coach full of passengers, and he meant to know the why and wherefore of it. Bits of their conversation on the long ride echoed in his mind. At the time he imagined he was running a huge bluff to save his face, that he was putting over a false character born of necessity. But right at his side had sat a young lady, a beautiful girl, who toyed with his emotions unmercifully. Visions of her display of limbs, of the scene in the dining car where he insisted on cutting her steak, of the candy he bought her, and a hundred and one things returned to his mind. Then he recalled her questions about marriage, about love, and whether he thought she would make a good wife.

As he looked back it all seemed so humorous. He thought her a cute little child—she thought him the mayor of Bengate. She was a musical comedy dancer—he a substitute waiter. That is, he was a waiter. Now he was bent on a Sherlock Holmes career—to know the reason for her intriguing role—and then, too, she was ravishingly pretty, sweet, and, well, he wanted to know her. And, furthermore, he wanted to laugh with her over their escapade.

"Say, there, what's the grand idea?" a gruff question in-



interrupted his dreams. From behind, a bull-necked, oversized giant had approached. His mammoth hand gripped Ralph by the lapel of his uniform dress suit.

"Yer a waiter, ain't yuh?" he demanded. "Well, get back to the kitchen! What do yuh think we're givin' this show for? Back to the kitchen, you boob!" He gave Ralph a rough jerk. "And make it snappy!" he added.

In an instant, Ralph was himself. With deliberate fingers he loosened the man's grip from his shoulder. The arm towel slipped from his hand and dropped inconspicuously to the floor, out of sight. An expression of utter surprise swept over his face.

"Just a moment, sir," he declared. "You've evidently made an error. I am not a waiter, and never was, if that is what you are trying to convict me of. I am a guest—my check will be paid when I leave. Now kindly go about your own business before I call the manager!" With that Ralph turned his back on the befuddled "bouncer" and strode down the aisle toward the stage. Applause shook the hall as Irene darted from the wings and took her bow. Ralph shot one more glance at her, enough to convince himself that he had not been mistaken in her identity—that she was Dot, the child of the crowded coach—and then she was gone!

A throbbing thought possessed his mind—some way he must reach her, talk to her. But how? Why, back stage, of course. So Ralph threaded his way through the jammed hall toward a small door marked exit, confident of success.



## CHAPTER VII

Breathless and exhausted, Irene entered her dressing room and found Mable about to depart. The blonde show girl was in the act of adding a few touches to her already thickly cosmeticed features. Irene sank on her couch and leaned back restfully.

"Gee, your applause was great, dearie," Mable declared. "I could hear it way up here. Wish I had a number like that. But I guess my correct job is sellin' behind a counter, or somethin' of the sort." She picked up her hand bag and started for the door. "It's been awfully nice of you to let me hide up here in your room," she continued. "I've got a nasty job ahead, and if I expect to see Rufus, I'd better go down on the stage now. He'll probably be there, as usual, to watch the girls when they leave." She opened the door and stepped out on the narrow runway. "Well, so-long, dearie," she called over her shoulder, "and good luck."

Irene was alone. Exercising diligent care, she erased the powder and paint from her flesh by a scrubbing with cold cream, then the mascaro from her turquoise eyes, and the rouge from her naturally red lips. Removing her costume, piece by piece, she laid it away in a small grip. Then she took the large Spanish comb from the coils of her chestnut hair and, shaking her head, allowed it to curl below her ears. She glanced for an instant at her partly clad figure in the tall mirror.

For some unknown reason, a recollection of her humorous incident with the young mayor on the train, formed in her mind. Undoubtedly her knee length petticoat, her unpainted features, and bare shoulders, were remindful of the simple

childish dress she had worn that day. He had been an awfully likeable chap, she remembered, so nice and kind to her. She wondered for a moment if he had regained control of his town, or if he was still the ostracized mayor. He had looked so funny with his mud-stained clothes and black eye, but yet she had to admit that he had been, in their brief acquaintance, about everything she could wish a gentleman to be. She almost wished she had donned her childish clothes again and visited him at the hotel as he had requested; but that would have been going a bit too far, she feared.

A light tap roused her. Throwing a dressing gown about her unclothed shoulders, she crossed to the door and listened.

"Who's there?" she inquired, hoping against hope that it was not her employer or his egotistical friend. Naturally Irene was unaware of the deep grudge one held for the other; very few were.

"Who's there?" she repeated, turning the knob slightly, her features clouding.

"It's I," a voice answered. "Your friend from Bengate, Ralph Fenton. Please, may I see you, Miss Dare?"

For a moment the unexpected appearance of the youthful mayor on the scene stunned Irene. But she quickly recovered and gathered her wits together. How she ever replied she never afterwards remembered. Somehow though, she heard herself speaking.

"Why, Mr. Fenton!" she exclaimed, leaning against the door for support. "This is indeed a surprise. If you'll wait just a minute I'll be dressed. I'd like awfully much to see you again. Will you wait?"

"If you'll allow me to come in your room, I'll promise to hide my eyes while you dress. I've had a strenuous time getting this far, and I'm afraid, Miss Dare, that if any of the employees see me, I'll be put out. And I do want to see you."

"It's strictly against orders to receive guests in the rooms," Irene felt herself gradually slipping, "but I guess it would do no harm, Mr. Fenton," and then in the next breath: "All right, come in."

She opened the door, and with a swift step, Ralph entered. He closed the barrier after him, then turned and with a broad smile on his lips, bowed.

"I salute," he laughed, "the best little dancer and imitator in all the world. Miss Dare, my compliments. Your performance on the train was brilliant, to say the least. Not only did your little jest completely fool the entire coach, but I, your neighbor, was also absolutely deceived."

"It was awfully mean of me," Irene smiled, "to take such advantage of you, considering the trouble you had on your mind at the time, but I just couldn't resist the opportunity, Mr. Fenton. I hope you'll forgive me. Do you?"

"Forgive you," Ralph echoed, "I think I should be begging your pardon for not recognizing you as the beautiful young lady you are. Had I known, I fear our ride would have been less pleasant. I might have been tempted to make love to you, and I'm sure that would have ruined everything. But I know you are anxious to dress, so don't mind me. I'll hide my eyes against the wall here."

So saying Ralph smiled and faced the wall. Stepping in a small closet at the end of the room and pulling the draperies about her, Irene quickly donned her street clothes. She had barely finished when a loud rap sounded at the door. An expression of fear swept over her features. Was it Gene, she wondered? Why, oh, why, had she allowed her guest to enter? The situation was embarrassing, if not compromising. What would her foul employer think? He might even refuse to pay her salary on the grounds of disreputable conduct.

As the rapping sounded again, this time louder than pre-



viously, Ralph came to her rescue. Motioning her to answer the summons, he tiptoed silently to the closet and drew the draperies about him. Irene took a fresh hold on herself and opened the door. Her worst fears were realized, for Gene stood in the dimly illuminated runway, his lips curved to a repulsive grin, his arms folded across his flat chest. A strong odor of stale beer hung heavy in the air about him.

"Sorry to disturb you, honey," he said, "but I'm gonna pay you off, tonight." Then he gently but firmly shoved Irene back a step, entered, and closed the door behind him. "Say, sweetie," he began, anew, "there's no use us breakin' up this way. Rufus is a nice feller and he likes you. Now, why can't you and him get along? He'll treat you like a queen, he's got money an' you'd have about everything you wanted. I'll star you in the Revue and advertise you like a circus. Do me a little favor and reconsider your refusal. Won't you? Now be a sport." Gene had rehearsed his argument in advance. He thought it convincing, and actually expected Irene to accept.

"Mr. Suttle," Irene began, a frown creasing her brow, her nerves on edge, "you have made me an offer that is impossible, utterly impossible. I have once before refused, and I do not intend to change my decision. I hope that is final. Mr. Gunning may be a perfectly wonderful gentleman, that I don't doubt, but as I once before said, I'm not accepting social engagements. If you'll pay me my salary, I'll get my things together and leave."

Gene shifted uneasily. His gaze rested on the door. "Before I do, honey," he declared, "Rufus wants to have a word with you. Maybe he can change your stubborn mind." He turned toward the door. "Rufus," he called in a loud voice, "come on in an' pay us a little visit."

The door swung ajar and the pompous political boss stood forth. "Well, well, this is a surprise to get such



a hearty welcome," he vowed, with an attempt at humor. Then he entered and closed the door. "I hope I'm not intruding," he smirked. He, too, like his accomplice, permeated the air with a foul odor of bad liquor.

"If both of you don't leave, immediately," it was Irene who spoke, "I'll call for assistance. Now please be gentlemen and go."

"I hear somebody callin' me," Gene declared, "guess I'd better be going. Night, pals." He turned and quickly walked through the doorway, slamming the barrier behind him.

Irene faced Rufus. Grinning, he stepped nearer and with a quick movement jerked away the lace of her dress from over her milk white shoulder. "No need to be 'fraid, sweetie," he said, "I ain't gonna hurt you."

With a scream, Irene turned and fled to the wall nearby the draped closet. Rufus followed, his small eyes glowing with an insane passion. He reached a moist hand for her, and then something occurred. What it was, he never afterwards remembered.

Unable to control the desire to intervene any longer, Ralph leaped out of the closet and planted a smashing fist against the bulging flesh of the intruder's jaw. Rufus dropped like a rock, and lay motionless on the floor. A tiny stream of sticky blood oozed from a nasty cut where Ralph's blow had found its mark. He was cold, out for the count.

"I'd have gladly interfered, sooner," Ralph declared, as he dragged the limp body in the closet and drew the draperies about it, "but I didn't want to cause a rumpus for fear of gathering a gang, and we'd never have got out of it then. I knew one of 'em would leave, so I just waited till I could dispose of the dirty rat that stayed."

"It's wonderful of you, Mr. Fenton," Irene cried, her voice shaken with fear, "and you must know I appreciate it. Why, you hardly know me, and you've already fought for me."

"No time for thanks, now," Ralph interposed, "we've got to beat it, and besides, anybody'd done the same for so pretty a young lady as you. But if you really want to repay me, call me Ralph as you did on the train. But now we must hurry."

"From now on it's Ralph, then," Irene replied, as she hurriedly stuffed away her few possessions in the partly packed grip. "And you must call me Dot," she added, "that's in the bargain."

"I knew you'd say that," he declared, as he snapped Irene's grip, locked her arm in his, and they started for the door. "It's sweet of you. And if you hadn't, I'd been terribly disappointed."

Stepping out in the dim runway, Irene led Ralph toward the steps that descended to the stage and thence to the Casino's back entrance. As they paused at the top of the flight, she threw a backward glance over her shoulder in time to see Gene advancing on the run.

"Hurry!" she cried, "my employer is following us!" Without answering, Ralph locked his hand in hers, and they ran down the stairs toward the stage door. Reaching the barrier Ralph jerked it open and his eyes met those of the giant "bouncer" he had evaded earlier in the evening.

"I'm looking for you," the burly fellow growled, as he stepped forward and blocked the passageway, "and I'm gonna take you where you belong." His huge hand grasped Ralph's coat front. An assistant loomed up behind him. "Punch him one for good measure," the newcomer advised. The "bouncer" was about to comply, when from the dressing room runway a screeching voice halted him.

"Hell with the fellow," Gene cried, as he descended on the run, "get the girl."

And then the fight began for sure. With a well aimed right-cross, Ralph landed his fist on the "bouncer's" under-

slung jaw, and as the mammoth fellow staggered back under the unexpected impact, he tripped his assistant, which offered Ralph opportunity to plant a left-swing on his tumbling opponent's ear. Then, in the hot tangle that ensued, he managed to clear a passageway for Irene, but before she was able to reach the door, Gene arrived and threw her brutally to one side. From somewhere in the shadows a tall slender figure darted, and two bony hands closed in a vice about the proprietor's oily neck. He sank to the floor, his eyes bulging, his face a lavender hue. Then Loko lunged at the nearest of Ralph's opponents, and the "bouncer" dropped with a thud, his left eye swollen almost shut. Seeing his support vanquished, the assistant slid to his knees and begged for mercy. Loko towered over him, his jet eyes afire, gurgling sounds rumbling in his throat.

Jumping to her feet from where Gene had thrown her, Irene ran to Ralph's side, stooping on the way to retrieve her grip from where it had fallen. Loko in a frenzy of pantomimical gestures beckoned them both to flee, but Ralph hesitated, hating to leave him with the trio of beaten thugs, whom he noted with a sharp glance, were gradually regaining their spirit. It would be a battle against terrific odds, he realized, and it was not man-play to walk out on a friend. But when Loko insisted, with plainly understandable motions, Ralph reluctantly shoved Irene ahead of him and they were presently lost in the curtain of gray fog that hung heavy in the chilly night air.

## CHAPTER VIII

By the time Gene had regained consciousness, his neck bruised by deep finger marks, and the "bouncer" had risen to his unsteady feet and wiped the blood from his closed eye, while his assistant aided with a damp handkerchief, Loko had leaped up the steps to the dressing room runway and disappeared. The fighting spirit had vanished from the beaten trio, and at Gene's command his two henchmen limped away toward the door that led to the kitchen. Then the proprietor snorted in disgust and mounted the stairs at a weakened stride. From the end of the dim runway Mable emerged at a swift pace. Seeing Gene, she paused nervously against the railing and fumbled with her hand bag. He glowered at her with the wrath prompted from his recent defeat. She avoided his gaze and started to pass on.

"What you been doin' up here?" he demanded. "Ain't I told you to keep away?" His arm barred her passage.

"I was just, just getting a few of my clothes I forgot when I went to the hospital," she replied in a wavering voice. "I thought they was up here—but I can't seem to find 'em. Guess they're lost by now."

"Sure you ain't seen Rufus?" he asked. "He's gonna be sore at me if he catches you hangin' around. I don't mind you, but you'd better steer clear of him."

"No, Mr. Suttile," Mable replied, "I told you the honest truth. I ain't seen him since early tonight. I don't even want to see him; I'm through. Please let me go now, will you?"

"All right kid—beat it!"

And Mable lost no time in complying. Before Gene had hardly gone a dozen steps down the runway, she had reached



the bottom of the steep stairs, and there she hesitated. For a moment she casually waited. Then she cast anxious glances in each direction, and it was obvious to the eye that her nerves were raw and on edge. A noise sounded behind a thick stack of discarded scenery. Mable gasped and stood back, frightened.

Loko stepped out from the dark shadows. He smiled at her, a cynical smile, brimming with significance. She nodded and leaned close to him. He bent over to hear what she said.

"I think so," she whispered in a tense voice, "but I'm not sure; we'd better wait."

Again Loko nodded. Then simultaneously they glanced directly into each other's eyes and parted. Mable walked toward the door that led to the crowded Casino, while the gaunt pantomimist slowly mounted the stairs to the runway. His eyes for some unknown reason, suddenly showed red at the rims, and his face assumed odd contortions that had no apparent connection with his mild actions. At the head of the stairs, he paused and glanced on each side in a casual manner. Then he walked slowly down the runway and presently disappeared in the darkness of the dressing rooms.

\* \* \*

When they made their swift departure from the scene of the fistic encounter, Irene and Ralph had hurried away as quickly as their feet could carry them. Not a taxi in sight, they boarded an up-town trolley at the Columbus Avenue intersection. And now after a short walk to the vicinity of Irene's hotel, they paused on the curbing opposite the edifice, and in the yellow halo of a corner street lamp, Irene displayed her gratitude to Ralph for his brilliant interception in her behalf. But as a modest young hero, he would have none of it.

"All I ask, Dot," he declared, "is your friendship. I think

you're great, marvelous, wonderful. And I know we'll get along fine, that is, if you'll give me the chance."

"Well, what ever under the sun gave you the idea I wouldn't gladly welcome your friendship?" Irene smilingly inquired. "After tonight, I could not very well deny such a little thing as that. And, if you must know it, I like you, anyway. Now, does that satisfy you?"

"You really like me? Well that makes everything great. Now I can telephone you, tomorrow, and perhaps if you'll accept my invitation, we'll lunch together. Will we?"

"Surely. Phone me here at the hotel in the morning," Irene replied. Then a frown clouded her brow and she added, "Oh, I'm so sorry I've forgotten to inquire; but have you been able to regain your seat as mayor of Bengate, yet? Really, since that day on the train together, I've thought a lot about you, and I surely hoped by this time you'd have driven away those crooked citizens."

Unable to determine on a definite reply, Ralph attempted to postpone his answer, when a speeding taxi drew to a sudden halt beside them and saved him the embarrassment. Mable's blonde head protruded from a swiftly opened door. Her face was ghastly pale, fear stricken.

"For God's sake, get in—both of you!" she cried, and when Irene and Ralph stared at her in amazement, she added, "I'll explain later, but now, I'm begging you to get in this cab!"

With an exchange of glances, Ralph assisted Irene to the interior of the car, and without delay, following Mable's instruction to the chauffeur, they sped down the narrow street.

"I got your address off the call-board back stage," Mable informed Irene in a trembling voice, "and I came as quick as I could. I don't know who did it, but you're my friend, dearie, so I thought I'd warn you; you didn't do it, I know,

but they're blaming you for murdering him. Rufus Gunning is dead! Stabbed to death!"

Unable to speak, Irene and Ralph stared at each other in blank astonishment. The latter was the first to recover. His words came slowly and deliberately.

"You say, Miss," he addressed Mable, "you say they accuse Irene; that they suspect her?"

"Yes. I heard Gene tell the cops myself. From what he said I couldn't get who'd found the body—but it was found in your room, dearie, in the closet, with the knife hid under the couch. Gene called the cops from the Chinatown Squad the minute he was sure Rufus was dead. I was sitting in the main Casino with some of the girls when the word reached us. I beat it back stage and got there just as the cops did. Gene came right out and accused you, dearie. Said you'd had a row with Rufus over somethin', and that he saw you and a strange man running away from your room where the body was found. One of his dirty bouncers told the same tale. So I got your address and grabbed a cab. I don't think you did it, 'cause you're too sweet an' nice. But that means nothing to the cops, and they're after you, dearie, and you've got to beat it."

"It does look bad, Dot," Ralph said, after a moment of silence, "but don't worry, you're innocent. You know it and so do I, and we'll prove it to the authorities. There's only one thing to do," he faced Mable, "have the chauffeur drive to the Central Police Station," he requested.

"You're not gonna——" Mable looked bewildered.

"Absolutely," Ralph answered. "It's the only way out." Then as Mable complied, he turned to Irene, who had sat silent and calm throughout the entire ordeal. "Now, Dot," he said, "I know I don't have to ask you to be brave; you're that sort of a girl. But I want you to trust me, have confidence in what I do, and above everything stand by the

statements I make. I realize you hardly know me, and that it's rash for me to expect you to honor my advice, but please, when we get to the Station allow me to talk to the officers. Please, Dot, will you?"

"Why, Ralph," Irene instantly replied, "I have confidence in you, and I do trust you. Whatever you choose to say I'll stick by. And I know we'll win out in the end, anyway."

"That's the right spirit, Dot, and before it slips my mind, I'm not going to mention my public office, it might result in a lot of unpleasant notoriety that may be avoided. I'll give my real name, but that's all."

"I think you're perfectly right, Ralph. It might ruin your career; a sensational mixup such as this horrible affair. Oh, why, why, did it have to happen just as it did? You——"

The abrupt stopping of the cab before an edifice of harsh, gray stone, interrupted Irene. The door of the taxi opened and Ralph assisted her out. Then, simultaneously, they faced Mable.

"Thanks, ever and ever so much," Irene said, "I'm sure it'll all come out all right, Mable. And when it does, I want to see you and really thank you. Good-bye, dear."

"You'd do the same for me, dearie," Mable replied, forcing a smile.

But for some undetermined reason Ralph failed to display his gratification. Instead, he bowed curtly, and led Irene up the steps of the Police Headquarters, as the taxi drove speedily away and vanished in a bank of damp mist.



## CHAPTER IX

As they had journeyed up-town in the clattering trolley a few moments previous, Ralph, for want of a more plausible excuse, had explained to Irene that he had been slumming with a party of tourists in the Barbary Coast quarter, and thus accounted for his appearance in the Pacific Coast Casino, and also for the evening dress he wore. But now, after having been ushered into a small ante-room by a Desk Sergeant, following the revelation of their identities and their connection with the Midway affair, Irene, under the glaring rays of bright lights, for the first time noted the strange waiter-like cut of Ralph's garment. Before she decided to comment, a door in the small room opened and a Police Captain entered. At his heels trailed several plainclothes detectives and a be-spectacled newspaper reporter. Nodding curtly to Irene and Ralph, the Captain motioned them to chairs. Then he drew up his own to a small table that centered the room, and instructed them to do likewise. The detectives remained standing, as did the eager reporter.

Shifting his gaze from one to the other, the Captain drew a sheet of paper from an inner pocket. Then he directly faced Irene. "Miss Dare?" he asked. Irene nodded. "You are a dancer employed at the Midway Casino?"

"Yes, sir—that is, I was. My engagement ended, tonight."

"Were you fired?"

"Yes, sir. Forced to quit because I refused to comply with a demand the proprietor insisted upon."

"Just what did he demand?"

"That I associate with a friend of his."

"Who was the friend?"

"Mr. Rufus Gunning."

The Captain nodded to one of the detectives who jotted down notes on a pocket pad. Then he faced Irene again.

"Miss Dare," he said, eyeing her with a firm gaze, "I appreciate your surrender, and so will the prosecution, but it is not my place to pass judgment in cases of this kind; I can merely act according to the law. I'm sorry, but I'll have to place you under arrest for the murder of Rufus Gunning."

Irene's hands clenched and crimson flushed to her cheeks. She shot a frightened glance at Ralph and received a comforting one in return. Somehow she felt as though she were in another realm, as though the horrible affair was a nightmare, not actually happening, just a frightful dream. Calming herself, she realized that at this moment a plea of innocence would be futile, for the Police Captain was doing no more than his duty, so Irene controlled her tumultuous emotions and remained silent.

The Captain scribbled a few notes, then turned and faced Ralph. "What is your name?" he inquired.

"Ralph Fenton," came the answer.

"You're a friend of Miss Dare's?"

"Yes, sir, an old acquaintance. I attended the Casino show, tonight, and saw her for the first time in two weeks."

"Do you know why Miss Dare murdered Rufus Gunning?"

"She did not murder him!" There was no doubt in the reply.

"We have ample evidence to convict her, as the case now stands, less than an hour following the crime. Revenge, the motive—revenge on Gunning for causing her to lose her position. The murder occurred in her dressing room. The bloody knife was found under her couch. The body in her closet. The proprietor of the Casino and one of his trusted employees saw Gunning enter her room. The same pair a few minutes later heard a commotion on the runway out-

side of the dressing rooms, and then they saw Miss Dare running toward the stairs that lead to the stage and thence to the street. They tried to stop her and several of her friends interfered. They suspected something, even then. Were you, Mr. Fenton, one of the persons that helped her make her escape?"

"I most certainly was," Ralph answered. "When Gunning attacked her in her own room at the proprietor's instigation, I interfered in her behalf, and I also helped her escape. I —."

"Never mind for now," the Captain interrupted. "The Desk Sergeant will get your name and address, and don't you leave town until you're notified officially that we're through with you. You'll be an important witness, but I hardly think you're implicated otherwise. Now you may report to the Sergeant." He rose and faced Irene. "But you, Miss Dare," he continued, "will have to stay. I'm sorry, but the evidence is too strong. The detectives here will take you to the Women's Ward."

"Stop!" Ralph suddenly cried, leaping to his feet. "I can't stand to see an innocent person suffer, Captain. I confess! I killed Gunning! He tried to harm Miss Dare and I interfered and murdered him!"

"You swear you killed him?" demanded the Captain. "Under oath?"

"I absolutely did. Miss Dare did not even know it. She is innocent, and I'm not going to permit her to suffer. I alone am guilty. I submit to arrest!"

A thrilling sensation swept through Irene. She knew positively that Ralph was as innocent as herself, and she realized he had confessed only to save her from imprisonment until the guilty person was discovered. It was noble of him, but she couldn't allow him to condemn himself just to save her from a few days in jail at the most, until the murderer, the

real murderer was detected and caught. No, she would tell the truth, but a single glance from Ralph, a pleading glance, bade her remain quiet. So Irene reluctantly held her silence against her will.

Then Ralph requested a moment alone with her, and the Captain called his officers aside.

"Please, Dot," he said, "please stick by what I've said. You're a girl; you can't go to jail. And it won't hurt me any—I've helped you this far. Now please let me stick by my confession. It'll all turn out all right in the end. Be a brave girl and let me do the talking. I'll get out of this, Dot. Now don't you worry."

"Oh, Ralph," Irene declared, "I can't allow you to go through with this. The evidence points to me, and it's my fault for dragging you into it. Won't you retract your confession? Please do."

"I absolutely will not, Dot," Ralph replied. "If I did it would probably incriminate us both. Now please do as I say."

"I'll have to; that is, if you insist. But it does seem so unfair, so unjust——"

"You'll have to go, now," the Captain interrupted, calling across the room. "You, Miss Dare, will report to the Desk Sergeant, in company of Officer Delman. You'll be called for a witness, so keep in touch with Headquarters daily." He motioned to one of the detectives. "Take this man to the register," he commanded, "and book him for the murder of Rufus Gunning. Have him assigned to one of the single cells for the night." Then with an official bow to Irene, he turned and departed.

An officer on each side, Ralph shot a comforting smile to Irene as they led him out of the room and down a narrow stone corridor toward the rows of barred cells. And it was not till then that Irene realized she loved him. The thought



took her emotions by storm and as though in a trance she gave the Desk Sergeant her address and answered his many questions.

All the way to her hotel in a taxi, and long after she undressed and climbed in her bed, the realization echoed and re-echoed in her mind. A repayment for his brilliant deed would be impossible, she realized perfectly. But she loved, and perhaps he—who could tell? He had fought for her, when he barely knew her; he had suffered condemnation for her, less than an hour later; so why not? It was wonderful to think about, anyway, she admitted, even if he didn't, but he surely did. He must! And Irene knew it.

## CHAPTER X

Although she attempted every plan conceivable in the week that preceded the trial of Ralph Fenton for the murder of Rufus Gunning, Irene was unable to aid him in any definite manner or form. On the few occasions the authorities permitted her to see him in his cell at the County Jail, she begged him and pleaded with him to retract his confession and allow her to face the trial. But Ralph would have none of it. He knew that unless he stuck to his story, Irene would face an almost impenetrable wall of circumstantial evidence. Everything pointed to her as the guilty party and only Ralph's confession, which was plausible enough under the circumstances, saved her.

He absolutely insisted that he had visited Irene at her dressing room after the show, and that when Rufus attempted to harm her, he had intervened, stabbing the political boss with a steak knife in the fight that ensued. It had all occurred while Irene started down the runway for the street. Not knowing the extent of Rufus' wounds, so Ralph declared, he had quickly followed her and they had fought their way to the street. When informed that Rufus was dead and that the evidence pointed to Irene, he saw no other honorable way out, so he gave himself up. And all Irene's pleading would not change this confession. It was one or the other who must suffer, Ralph realized, and he preferred to be the one.

So it followed that Ralph went on trial for murder. Under his continual stare, Irene was forced to corroborate his false statements as she took the witness stand, although the very thought of him suffering in her behalf, nearly drove her insane. As the trial progressed and the prosecution piled

up point after point against Ralph, Irene searched near and far for Loko, hoping that he might prove a valuable witness for the defense. But try as she would, she was unable to locate him. The last anyone had seen of him was the night of the murder. He had apparently vanished.

And then, as she sat in the partly filled court room as the case drew to a close, Irene knew that she had fought a losing battle. In summing up, the prosecuting attorney declared that although there was some contradicting evidence, he felt positive that the defendant's confession had been verified to an extent which called for conviction, and that Ralph Fenton, without a doubt, had killed Rufus Gunning.

The Judge pronounced sentence—imprisonment in San Quentin Prison for life. And as they led Ralph away a moment later, Irene muffled a sobbing scream and fainted—to recover an hour later in her hotel room with Mable at her side.

At first, the recollection of the scene in the court room, and the sight of the chorus girl, frightened Irene. But gradually her mind cleared away the tangled web of thoughts, and she was able, with effort, to regain her natural composure. Questions were on the tip of her tongue, when the chorus girl, realizing her befuddlement enlightened her.

"Feel better, dearie?" she inquired. "Guess you don't know how you got here, do you?"

"No, I don't Mable," Irene replied. "I haven't the slightest idea. The last I remember was seeing the officers leading Mr. Fenton out. Then everything seemed to go black."

"It must have," Mable commented. "You fell flat in the aisle—completely out. I was sitting in the back of the courtroom during the last couple of hours. I didn't want to be seen. This whole business has got on my nerves. I dream of Rufus all night, and I keep thinkin' of him no matter what I'm doing. I couldn't keep away from the last day of the

trial, so, as I said, I sneaked into a rear seat. Then, when I saw you faint and watched 'em carry you into an ante-room, I followed; told 'em you was my friend; and they let me bring you here. But, dearie, you'd better rest for a while till the news kinda blows away. It must be tough to have a friend get stuck like that, when, when he ain't guilty."

In an instant Irene was all ears. "What makes you believe that Mr. Fenton is not guilty, Mable?" she inquired.

"Aw, dearie. I see through it all. He's only tryin' to save you," came the answer.

"Then you think I'm guilty? That I killed Rufus?"

"Heavens, no! Loko murdered him. Who else could? He's disappeared, ain't he? Nobody's seen him since that night, have they? Didn't he have a case on you? Wasn't he jealous of Rufus? And above everything—he's a nut, crazy as they make 'em. Now, dearie, you've got my opinion on that little murder. And I believe every word of it. Take my dope, Loko's the guilty bird."

"Why—why, I never even imagined it could be he," Irene exclaimed. "But he could have done it at that. On second thought, what you say does ring true. I knew he would make a good witness, so I've tried to find him since the first day. But as you say, if he isn't guilty, why has he disappeared? He must know something about it, anyway. And Mable, I'm going to find him if it takes a lifetime. Mr. Fenton is innocent; I know it absolutely. It's just as you say; he's afraid they'll jail me if he doesn't stick by his confession. So he lied like a hero, and now they've condemned him to prison for life. Oh, it's horrible, Mable; you don't know how I feel. And I promise you I'll not rest till the real murderer is in his place. I'm determined, and I'll find the guilty person if I die in the attempt! Loko or whoever it happens to be!"



"I wouldn't advise you to go too far," Mable cautioned. "Anybody who would commit murder, would do about anything. And if Loko thought you was on his trail, he'd probably get rid of you as he did Rufus. He's crazy, out of his dome, an' when a bird gets that way it's good night for a body that fools with 'em. If I was you, I'd scout around a bit; but I'd steer clear of Loko. Take it from me, dearie, a madman is no plaything. And that dumb clown is sure dippy."

"I wouldn't care for myself," Irene declared, a vision of Ralph in her mind, "if I thought I could help Mr. Fenton. And Mable, madman or not, if Loko's guilty I'll send him up. I'll hunt and hunt till I find him. He must know something of the horrible affair, even if he isn't guilty, and now that you've said what you have, I feel certain."

"You're your own boss, dearie," Mable commented, rising and making ready to depart, "but if it was me, I'd keep away from Loko; he's dangerous, or he wouldn't have killed Rufus."

"You're not leaving so soon?" Irene asked.

"Yes, dearie. Gotta date with a new sweetie, so I'd better be going. See you later."

"All right, Mable. And thanks awfully much for bringing me home. That's the second favor I'm indebted to you for, and I won't forget, either. Good-bye, dear." The door closed and Irene was left alone with her thoughts.

Into her mind there had seeped the preliminary framework of a plan of action that was to follow. She knew Ralph had made an unimaginable sacrifice to save her from a web of circumstantial evidence, a sacrifice too great for words. And she also knew that never would her mind rest at ease until he was free. There remained only one avenue of procedure for her to traverse—she must find the guilty party. And she would, she vowed to herself, even if it took her last penny, her last ounce of energy.

The only plausible solution to the murder must lay in the vicinity of the Casino, she decided. For it was there it had occurred, so it was there the clues must be. The problem resolved itself into one question. How to come and go at the Midway freely and without hindrance?

She considered Gene, the sulky proprietor. Throughout the trial he had sat as an important witness for the prosecution, and his testimony had practically verified Ralph's false confession. He had stated under oath that dinner had been served to Miss Irene Dare in her dressing room several hours previous to the crime, which quite naturally accounted for the steak knife wielded by the slayer, and although Gene, Irene distinctly recalled, had at first attempted to insinuate that she was guilty, despite Ralph's plausible confession, he had changed his policy as the trial proceeded in favor of Ralph's guilt. Not more than an hour before the Judge pronounced sentence, he had sent her a short note which she now recovered from a jacket pocket and reread.

"Honey" (so it began): "Sorry I blamed you, but it did look bad at first. Now we know who did it, why can't we be friends? Drop down to the Casino and see me. Your job is still open, and always will be.

"Your pal, "GENE."

At the time she received it, it repulsed her and she had ignored its contents entirely. But now as she read it for the second time, she saw between the lines a chance to install herself in the vicinity of the crime. Gene had always liked her, more or less, that she knew, and only because Rufus wanted her himself, had he backed out, that much was obvious. So it was up to her, Irene decided, to take advantage of this desire of Gene's, if she cared to gain Ralph's release. And she most assuredly did. Nothing short of death would stop her now. She would go the limit to break the chain of evidence that circled the man she loved, and prove his false confession a heroic attempt to save her from circumstances. In her mind, that thought was paramount. She was, above everything, determined.

## CHAPTER XI

Gene Suttle sat at the circular table in the den of his private quarters, and curled his mouth to a broad snickering grin. He was pleased with himself, immensely pleased, contented with his position, and utterly satisfied. And on top of all that, a desire which lurked in the chambers of his vile mind, was on the immediate verge of being satisfied. Irene had accepted the terms of his note by telephone a few moments previous, and, furthermore, she had consented to lunch with him this very day. He knew she would favor him in time. "A dame that shows spirit is worth going after," he often repeated. And he gave her credit for her rigid stand against Rufus—but himself, well, that was another proposition. Perhaps she wanted him all the while; that in attempting to get her for Rufus, he had bungled, angered her, and that he had been blind to her preference for him. He had sent her a note. She had agreed to meet him. Maybe, she did want him. Why not? He was Gene Suttle, wasn't he?

Gene fixed his gaze on the dial of the small clock that reposed on his desk. It was ten minutes of one—Irene had promised to come at one-thirty. There was plenty of time to do what he had in his mind—his daily task. So deciding, he called the kitchen on a speaking tube that hung from a crevice in a side wall.

"Send up the usual order," he demanded, "an' be quick about it!" Then he dropped the tube and crossed to a bureau in the far corner of the room. From the top drawer he procured an ugly automatic, and carefully examined the chamber. It was loaded, five steel bullets. He smiled and tucked it in his hip pocket, cautious that his coat concealed it entirely.



A light rap sounded on the outer door which opened on the balcony. With a quick glance about the room, he crossed to the barrier and opened it. Irene smiled and extended her hand.

"I'm a little early," she apologized, "but you won't mind, will you, Gene?"

"No, no," Gene replied, a trace of nervousness in his voice, "come right in, Irene. Glad to see you."

"I was doing some shopping on Grant Avenue and I finished earlier than I expected," Irene explained. "I should have phoned, I suppose, but I thought you'd like a surprise."

They were seated in the front room, now. Irene, at Gene's suggestion, had removed her hat and gloves. She beamed smile after smile on him, and he in return, patted her hand caressingly, and apologized with a prepared speech, for his rash blunder in suspecting her of murdering Rufus. In reply, she laughed it off as an unavoidable error, and requested a glass of wine. Gene immediately popped the cork of a pre-war vintage, and was in the act of pouring, when again a knock sounded at the outer door.

A frown corrugated his low forehead as he swung open the barrier. A waiter stood in the doorway, a small tray on his arm.

"Your order, Mr. Suttle," he said.

For a moment Gene was undeniably disconcerted. Then with a nervous gesture he spoke: "Just set it over there in the corner," he commanded, "and take this order for two." Then, forcing a smile, he turned to Irene, who had watched the strange transaction with no little interest. "I've been on a diet," he explained, pointing to where the waiter had placed the tray, "but to celebrate our reunion I'll break rules. We'll eat together. Order what you want, Irene."

Selecting her dishes with delicate care, Irene gave her order. And when Gene attempted to do likewise, but failed



utterly, the waiter disappeared down the balcony. Closing the door, Gene shot a queer glance at the tray of food in the corner. Then he forced a grin and joined Irene.

"Honey," he declared, taking in her beauty with a sweeping gaze, "you're prettier than ever. Don't blame poor old Rufus for liking you. He saw your points, same as I do, and always have. First time I set eyes on you, I said to myself: 'There's a kid that's gonna be a star some day, and a big one.' And now, sweetie, that's what I'm gonna make you—headliner of the Frolic Revue. What do yuh think of that? Not so bad, eh?"

"Oh, that's just wonderful of you, Gene," Irene replied with a remarkable attempt at seriousness, "if it had been you instead of Rufus—well I'd never have left. You should have known that, Gene. When it comes to love, I think you're dense." She laughed and sipped her wine. Gene was staring slyly at her silk-clad ankles. As she set the glass on the table, she accidentally slid up her dress an inch or two. Then, when Gene lifted his eyes and deliberately snickered, she returned the gaze with a cute wink of her long dark lashes.

"While we're waiting," she suggested, "show me my new dressing room. I'd rather have the one at the end of the runway, so I'll be—be handy."

"Just as you say, honey," Gene answered. "I want you near me, anyway." He led the way to the room, nicer by far than her former dingy compartment. Once he pinched her cheek and made an insinuating remark. In answer, Irene forced a smile and laughed it off. Then, when she realized she was far from aid in case of an attack, she remarked that their lunch was probably waiting, and Gene reluctantly complied with the suggestion to return.

They were hardly seated when the meal was served, and, while they ate, Gene kept up a continual lecture on the wonderful things he was going to give Irene. He promised

everything—gowns, charge accounts galore, and even automobiles. Irene echoed his words with every mode of gratitude she could command. Then, just as they finished eating, and Gene was slyly patting her hand in the palm of his own, a very startling sound suddenly filled the room. It was not, so Irene thought, unlike the gurgle of a deep, underground pool. Faint, far off, it came, and seemed, somehow, familiar to her. But yet she was unable to place it. Gene's face strangely assumed a pale, frightened hue. Then, realizing Irene had noticed, he quickly forced a smile and started a loud record on a phonograph that stood nearby. His fingers quivered as he faced her again.

"Water pipes are leakin' in the basement," he said. "Must have 'em fixed; can't stand that noise."

And then in an instant Irene knew. It was vague, the realization, but there was no mistaking. That uncanny gurgle could come only from the throat of Loko. But where was he? And why?

Gene had again seated himself. He was trembling from head to foot, but made a fighting attempt at control. Irene glanced away, lest she betray her own emotions. Then an idea struck her.

"Gene," she said with a pretty smile, "I guess I'd better be going now. I promised to meet one of the girls, but don't fear, old dear, I'll be back, tonight. After what you're going to do for me, I'd be a fool to stay away."

"All right, honey," Gene replied, undeniably pleased with her departure, "see you before the show. And then afterwards we'll have dinner up here, eh?"

"Just as you say, Gene. You're my boss from now on."

"Well, if I'm your daddy, aren't you gonna slip me a kiss before you go? Sure, you are, honey—that's a girlie."

It was probably the most repulsive moment of Irene's life, but she took it bravely, pressing her warm lips against his

odorous mouth and smiling to prove she liked it. Then with a cute little wink, she waved him a farewell and started toward her new dressing room, a definite plan in mind.

One of the Filipino kitchen boys emerged from the steps that descended to the stage. Irene motioned to him. When he reached her side, she handed him a silver quarter.

"Mr. Suttile is in his room," she said. "Tell him that a lady wants to see him right away. I'll wait at the stage door for him. Now hurry."

The boy nodded and started toward the balcony. Positive that she was unwatched, Irene slipped in her new dressing room and paused by the partly open door. Presently approaching footsteps became audible. Gene passed swiftly by the door, headed for the stage. When he was out of sight, Irene ran quickly down the hallway to his room; found the door unlocked, and entered. The phonograph was still playing. The gurgling sound had ceased.

Hurriedly crossing the front room to the den, Irene hid herself behind a Japanese screen that stood next to the bureau. Almost afraid to breathe, she pulled it back against her and assumed a tense position. She did not have long to wait, for presently the outer door slammed, and she heard Gene cursing in a low monotone. Then he entered the back room, and she was able to view him through a small hole in the carved design that decorated the screen.

"Now for you!" he growled, and threw a staring glance toward a spot on the floor where the carpet was threadbare. "I'll learn you to make a noise, and ruin a good start, you crazy loon."

With that he flung off his coat, jerked the ugly automatic from his hip pocket, and started for the front room. When he returned almost instantly, the small tray of food was on his arm.

"I shouldn't feed yuh for that damn noise. But, by God, you get on my nerves when I don't," he snarled.



Then, setting the tray on the table, and fingering his automatic, he pulled back the carpet from a corner of the floor. A padlocked trap-door loomed into view. With trembling fingers he swiftly unlocked the latch, and jerked open the wooden square. As he did, he leaped to one side. The gurgling rumble sounded deep down in the dark pit. Gene laughed hoarsely and picked up the tray from the table.

"Take that an' love it!" he cried, as he spilled the contents of the tray down the black opening, "you're damn lucky, you are. I've a good mind to starve yuh from now on. You dumb lummo, you!" Then again he laughed. The dull rumble was his answer.

"Don't you wish you could get me!" he snickered, "but you never will. You'll rot to dust before you see light again. Take it from me." Cursing, he kicked the trap-door shut and clamped on the lock. As he rolled back the carpet, he laid the automatic on the circular table. With a wild leap, Irene knocked over the screen, and grasped it before Gene even comprehended the situation.

"Put up your hands, or I'll shoot!" she cried, aiming directly at his head. "And stay where you are. Stay there or I'll pull the trigger!" It was obvious that she meant just what she said. Gene reluctantly lifted his hands in obedience, his face assuming a mean brooding expression. His teeth gnawed at his lips, his pale eyes narrowed between their rims.

"So this is your little game," he snarled. "Well, how much do you want to keep still? Name your price."

"I'll give you one minute to unlock that trap-door. If you refuse, I shoot," Irene replied, her expression one of firm unwavering determination. "Hurry up—the quicker you comply the better."

Gene laughed at her demand. "Quit the kidding," he suggested, "that gat's unloaded. Not a shell in it."



"All right," came the reply, "I'll aim at you and shoot."

"Stop! For God's sake, stop!" Gene screamed in horror. "I'll open it. Give me a chance, will yuh—give me time!"

The key fumbled in his fingers. Then with a click the lock finally sprung and uncoupled. With a shudder, he shrank back on his knees, quivering with fear. Icy drops of sweat beaded his forehead.

"Open it!" Irene demanded, "or I'll make good my threat."

Gradually Gene pulled back the thick trap from the square of darkness. The gurgling noise again became audible. Gene's eyes blurred and the color vanished from his cheeks.

"God!" he cried, "don't let him get out! He's crazy! Wild! He'll kill us both!"

But Irene evidently knew better. Stepping nearer to the pit of blackness, she shoved the automatic close to Gene's frightened face.

"Let down the ladder," she commanded, "or whatever it is you use. Be quick!" Her finger drew back on the trigger. Gene rose slowly to his feet and crossed to the bureau.

"Stop!" Irene called after him, "I've changed my mind; tell me where it is."

Gene turned and faced her. "In the bottom drawer," he said. "I'll get it."

"Never mind. Stay where you are," came the refusal.

Irene quickly crossed to the bureau and slid open the indicated drawer. A long knotted coil of thick rope lay in view. With a single jerk she removed it, her eyes not leaving Gene for an instant.

"Where do you fasten it?" she demanded.

"To that hook on the edge of the hole," he replied after a pause. "But I'm warning you—that madman will kill us both!"

Unheeding, Irene tossed the coil of rope near the dark hole. And then, as she swiftly bent to fasten it, Gene, with a rapid

movement, unseen by her, picked up a small tobacco can from the table and quickly threw it behind him. It lit on the floor in the corner of the room with a clattering jingle.

Startled, Irene shifted her gaze to the floor for a brief moment, and that was precisely what Gene desired. With a remarkable leap he knocked the automatic from her hand, and, before she could rise, snatched it from the floor, and stood over her, a relieved smile playing upon the lines of his face.

"Purty clever dame," he growled, "but not quite clever enough. Thought you could grab me with the goods, didja? Well, we'll see who's king now, see who's holdin' the meat."

Irene rose to her feet in silence.

Gene slipped the end of the rope over the hook and dropped down the knotted coil. A grin swept over his features.

"Climb down!" he demanded, "climb down before I shove you. You will fool with me, will yuh? I guess you'll pay."

Reluctantly Irene lowered herself over the edge of the black pit. The gurgling rumble sounded louder than previously; it grew in volume and swelled to a mighty roar. It was all Irene could do to refrain from collapsing. It had all happened so swiftly, so abruptly, she had barely time to think. But the knowledge that she was being forced into a black pit with an evident madman, weakened her resistance, until she thought she would faint. Gene's growling voice roused her.

"Get down!" he snarled, shoving the automatic in her face, "or I'll shove yuh. An' it's no little drop—ten feet after yuh get to the end of the rope. But I guess your friend, Loko, will catch you. Now move!"

The revolver prodded Irene in the center of her back. She began to lower herself, her hands gripped tightly about the rope. The moaning gurgle seemed to be drawing nearer with each instant. And then, with only her head remaining

above the floor level, the clatter of running feet suddenly sounded on the balcony, and was followed almost instantly by a shattering of the door in the front room.

Before Gene had time to either shoot, flee, or in fact think, the door burst off its hinges and half a dozen uniformed policemen dashed into the room. The Captain who imprisoned Ralph and released Irene that night at the Police Station led them, his revolver drawn. While in the background Mable followed, tears dimming her eyes.

"Stick 'em up!" the Captain commanded, "and hand over that gat! All right, Jim," he added, "take his revolver and search him. You," he indicated another officer, "help Miss Dare out of that hole."

And thus in a brief moment the rescue was completed. Gene surrendered his automatic without a murmur, and when the handcuffs were snapped about his wrist, he offered not the slightest resistance. With tender hands, Irene was lifted from the edge of the pit where she hung, and the moment she reached her feet, Mable ran to her side.

"Dearie," she sobbed, tears clouding her eyes and trickling tiny streams of mascaro across her heavily rouged cheeks, "I couldn't lie any longer, I just couldn't. It was driving me crazy, so I told the cops everything. You see, dearie, Loko and I saw Gene stab Rufus after you and Mr. Fenton ran out of the room. They had a scrap. Gene tried to bribe Loko to forget what he saw. Loko refused, so Gene drew a gun on him and knocked him into the hole. He had to almost kill him with a black-jack first. Then he got me, and said he'd do the same with me if I told what I had seen. He offered me everything I wanted—money, clothes, the life of a queen, and I was fool enough to accept. And, besides, I was afraid of him. That night when I came in the cab and warned you and Mr. Fenton that they suspected you, I did it 'cause my conscience hurt me. Since then I've nearly



gone mad, realizing that you were sufferin', and that your sweetie was in prison. Gene forced me to tell you I thought Loko was guilty. He thought it would keep you from suspecting him. So I did, dearie, but God, how I hated to! I was going dippy, bit by bit. Dreams at night; fear of Gene in the day. Then when I was backstage an hour ago and saw you enter Gene's room, I nearly passed out. I knew what a filthy rat he was, and I hated to imagine what he'd do to you. My conscience burned me up—I couldn't stand it. So I grabbed a taxi and beat it for Central Station. I told my story to the Chief—left out nothin'—and when I said I could prove my story by a prisoner held here in the Casino, he gave me the gang of cops and we came on the fly. Gee, dearie, I know you'll never forgive me for what I've done, but I was scared of Gene. He's a bad egg—killing Rufus, keeping Loko in a dungeon. There was no tellin' what he would do to me! But thank the Lord, dearie, I had sense enough to run for the cops when I saw he had you. If he'd have got you, I'd have gone crazy for sure. I'm sorry, dearie, sorry as I can be."

"You've nothing in the world to be sorry for, Mable," Irene instantly replied. "You did just what anybody would have done under the terrible circumstances. And by telling the police the truth and saving me from a horrible fate, you've redeemed yourself entirely. Now you've been just wonderful, Mable, so stop crying, dear, and everything'll be all right."

While Irene marveled at Mable's confession, and Gene sulked between two burly officers, the Captain discovered an extra length of rope hidden in a bureau drawer. This was fastened to the knotted coil and lowered in the black pit. All the while Loko's gurgling voice had been plainly audible, and now as the rope was drawn slowly out of the dungeon, the voice continued incessantly in an unintelligible



monotone. Finally with one last heave by the officers, Loko's head and gaunt face appeared at the square opening. With a mighty leap he was out. Rumbling a roar of rage he tore at Gene, who shrank back terrified against the wall. And it was all the policemen could do to hold him from the guilty proprietor. Finally he calmed and faced the Captain.

Digging his lean fingers far down in his bosom, he drew forth a tan kid glove. It was spattered with blood and marked with the initials "G. S." Then Loko displayed the manner in which Gene had slipped on the glove and then picked up the knife from the tray of dishes. With three thrusts he described the murder, and then, his convicting story told, the corroboration of Mable's confession complete, Loko assumed a grotesque expression and shook from head to foot with a peal of strange laughter. He had pleased Irene, and he was happy.

A hurried search through Gene's clothes closet revealed the glove that matched the one Loko had displayed with the blood spots. The evidence was complete. And Gene practically admitted his conviction with an ugly sneer.

As the policemen led him out, and Irene and Mable followed, with Loko and the Captain bringing up the rear, a smile, remarkable for its gloriousness, swept over Irene's countenance. It was a smile of smiles, of complete happiness.

Ralph, the one man in the world for her, had been rescued, and Irene had never previously been so happy in all her life. To realize that it all had occurred in less than forty-eight hours after his conviction was almost incredible. It seemed utterly impossible, vague, and unreasonable. But yet, just a few steps ahead was the real murderer, his wrists bound by links of steel, officers on each side, and at last Irene was content to be herself once again. With a sigh of relief, she gave herself up to the alluring, the thrilling thought of seeing the man she loved.

## CHAPTER XII

Naturally, to cover their own error, the authorities reprimanded the confessed murderer to an extent that almost verged on a jail sentence for perjury. But the newspapers, who made a sensational story of Ralph's display of devotion, came to his rescue by roasting the circumstantial evidence which would have convicted Irene, had she stood trial. In less than a week after Ralph was released, Gene began his life-long sojourn behind the gray walls of San Quentin Prison.

It was a tender scene, the reunion of Irene and Ralph, pathetic almost. She waited outside the Central Station in a taxi for him, tears dimming her turquoise eyes and a strange little throb tugging at her heart. Presently he emerged and with a single glance, located her. His face beamed with smiles as he advanced, his lips gnawed red to suppress the tears that were surging within him, and then he leaped in the cab beside her, and bade the chauffeur be off.

With a sigh of contentment, Irene sank in his embrace, and Ralph was the happiest mortal in all the world. Suddenly everything had turned to gold for him. There was no such animal as sorrow. He was, as the saying goes, born anew. Between them no words were necessary. Ralph had proven beyond a single doubt his devotion, and Irene, in her winning fight to gain his release, had done the same. But suddenly a cloud marred Ralph's serene horizon. There yet remained one dark blotch on his character. With caution he avoided it until they were alone and away from the rest of the world. Then he spoke.

"Irene, darling," his words came slowly and deliberately, "I've a confession to make, dear, a terrible confession. I'm

not what you think I am. I'm no mayor of Bengate, or anywhere else. I'm just a bluffer, a four-flusher. All I do is say things with dreams. I've been fired from more jobs than any man alive. I haven't a profession, a trade; I haven't anything but worthless dreams. That's my worst habit—dreams. When you saw me ostracized from that village, it was because I sold them a fake product. My story about being a mayor was just a lie, a dirty lie, and that's all I am, a liar. I was working as a substitute waiter at the Midway when I saw you. Thanks to luck, it was only for the night, and they failed to recognize at the trial my genuine connection with the Casino. To have you know I had lied to you, without the confession coming from my own lips, would have hurt me, hurt me deeply. I'm telling you the truth now, Irene, because I love you. Love you more than I knew a man could love a woman. More than any man ever loved any woman. And I don't ask your forgiveness, darling. All I want is a chance, just a single chance to make good, to show you what I am beneath the surface. Will you give it to me, Irene? Will you?"

"Yes, Ralph," Irene replied after a pause. "You've told me you love me, that you care for me, and that is all I ask. I have faith in you, no matter how you say you've bluffed or what you've done. I love you, and if you love me as you say, you will make good for me, some day. Nothing could stop you, Ralph, you're that sort of a—a gentleman."

"You're wonderful, Irene, wonderful. After the confidence you've displayed in me, I'll fight life, and I'll lick life and make you proud of me. Somewhere I always said there is something I can do—I've never known just what. But I'm absolutely certain that there is some position where I'll tower above the throng. And, darling, I'm going to find just what that something is. Sounds funny, that philosophy, but Irene, I believe it. And, dear, there is a saying that says

if you believe it, it's so. It's a big question I'm about to ask you Irene, a great trust. And if you refuse my heart will break, but it's the only real way out, and I'll stand it somehow."

Ralph paused to take Irene's hand in the palm of his own. She gave him a tiny squeeze and forced a smile.

"What is it, Ralph," she inquired.

"Will you wait, Irene? Will you wait one year for me? Give me twelve months to make good? Allow me to claim you as my wife when I return? I'm asking a lot, I realize, but it's impossible for me to ask you to have me as I am—a worthless bluffer. I'll win out, Irene, and I'll return for you, and you'll be proud of me. With you as my goal, I can't fail."

For a long while Irene did not answer. A stray tear lurked in her eye. Then, brushing it away, she spoke: "Ralph," she said, "I'll wait. I have confidence in you, and I trust you. You're a gentleman, and I won't wait in vain. Now go, dear, and don't send for me till you've made your mark. I'm through with the theatrical game, forever. I'm cured. It's a quiet, peaceful life at home for me, from now on. So Ralph, when the time comes, address me in care of Mrs. Celia Dare, my aunt, at Oakdale, California. Kiss me, dear, and then say good-bye."



### CHAPTER XIII

It was a bright, sunny afternoon nearly twelve months from the date of Ralph's release from the authorities, when a messenger boy delivered a telegram to Irene Dare at her Aunt Celia's residence in Oakdale. With trembling fingers she tore open the yellow envelope and read the message. "Meet me San Francisco Railroad Terminal," it requested, "twelve o'clock day after tomorrow. Ralph."

So Irene complied, and thus they met again. And from the manner in which they greeted each other, it was quite apparent that their affections had not diminished one single bit.

Even after they boarded an Eastbound train, Ralph held a mysterious silence regarding his success, and Irene knew there was a surprise in store for her. But what, she was unable to guess.

When they were snuggled closely to each other, as the train rambled on, and were as comfortable and contented as they could possibly be, but the conductor, in quest of tickets, came along and ruined it all. For a moment he stared at them, and then a recognition came to all three. He was the same conductor that had accepted Irene's half-fare ticket and also Ralph's counterfeit character as the Mayor of Bengate.

"Well, well," he declared in greeting, "glad to see you again, Mr. Mayor. How's that unruly town of yours getting along?" Apparently he did not recognize Irene.

For a moment Ralph was embarrassed. Then he managed to reply, winking at Irene as he did so.

"Fine!" he exclaimed, "everything's just wonderful. All the bum leading citizens kicked out—and peace reigns."

"Pleased to hear it. I knew you'd show 'em. I sized you

up in a minute." Then he punched the tickets Ralph handed him, and was about to pass on when he glanced down at Irene.

"Well, I'll be dogged!" he declared, "if it ain't that little child who rode beside you that night. My, but you've grown! Can't hardly believe it, but then I'm getting old, and time passes swiftly these days. Well, good luck to you both." He smiled and continued down the aisle.

Irene shot Ralph a glance and grinned, and, as he snuggled closer, he did the same, but his was far deeper. Behind it there lurked a meaning she knew nothing whatever about. But it was presently brought to light, and, furthermore, to her rapturous delight.

With a chugging moan the train drew to a halt before a station that was strangely familiar to Irene. On the brick platform a throng of not less than two hundred people were massed in holiday array. They cheered and yelled and many of them held banners and flags. The loud strains of a brass band floated on the air.

"Here's where we get off, dear," Ralph said. "And remember, darling, this is BENGATE, THE TOWN THEY RAN ME OUT OF."

As Ralph assisted her down the steps to the platform, amid cheers and greetings and strains from the village band, Irene found her astonished gaze riveted on the nearest banner. In gay colors and bold letters, it read:

For a Bigger, Better and Prosperous

BENGATE

Vote For

RALPH FENTON

for

MAYOR

The man who stung us with a bum product!  
The man who made good our loss!  
And the man who came back and made us  
    what we are, today!  
Our leading citizen—Ralph Fenton!

Irene looked at Ralph, and Ralph looked at Irene. "Why, Ralph!" she exclaimed. "You've really said it with dreams, and this time you've said it clearly—you've won!" And then they did just as two lovers always do, regardless of time or place. It was the sweetest kiss in Ralph's life, and Irene will never forget the immeasurable thrill of it as long as she lives.

P. S.—When in 'Frisco, drop in at Mable's Coffee House on Market Street and try a cup of the famous Java the blonde proprietress serves—it's great. And the next time M. D'Motriea is billed at your local Orpheum, don't fail to behold Loko in his famous pantomime dance.





# THE FORGOTTEN CITY





# THE FORGOTTEN CITY

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## CHAPTER I

A glance at the New York City telephone directory will reveal the commonplace fact that there are listed two hundred and fifteen persons who answer to the name of Meredyth. But if you inquire or mention the name to a genuine Bronx to Battery New Yorker, there will invariably come to his mind the vision of one definite individual. Charles Christopher Meredyth is to the average citizen of Gotham, the pinnacle of all financial desires and aspirations. President of the Consolidated American Railways, his chief interest, and controlling stockholder in a score of lesser corporations whose operating boundaries are international, has literally gilded his name with gold and placed him on a lofty throne in the world of dollars and cents, rarely equaled since the creation of a Bradstreet rating. It is said that once when a broker inquired regarding the value of a certain stock, that Charles Christopher Meredyth replied with a bored yawn and within ten minutes that certain stock had dropped almost to oblivion. Such was his immeasurable power.

Contradicting his immense wealth and infinitely vast success, the sixty-fifth birthday of this genius of finance found him weary of mind and sick at heart. Lavished with the luxuries of fortune, his physical self basked serenely in the atmosphere of comfort, but the thoughts of Charles Christopher Meredyth traversed a quite opposite channel.

Into his life, his very existence, there had been gradually transmuted from a seed of grief, an ugly thorn. In the beginning he had magnanimously grinned at the frivolous escapades of his son, Charles Christopher Meredyth, Jr.,

and branded them collectively as the youthful pranks of a modern boy. But when the years passed swiftly and the college days of his heir were mercifully over, and "Gallop" Meredyth, as the pampered son was known to Broadway and the scandal columns of Manhattan newspapers, failed to call a halt on his campaign of reckless dissipation, which was a public topic for snickering conversation and had already been exaggerated to preposterous proportions, the senior Meredyth quite naturally became seriously disturbed.

At a conference between father and son which reached far into the night, promises were exacted and forgotten within the period of a single month. For a brief time the youth gave up his questionable companions and the gay cafe life which had become his habit, but the scenes were too dangerously close at hand and the incidents too delightfully clear in his memory, so it eventually occurred that "Gallop" Meredyth forsook the idealistic notions of his father and returned with a mighty splurge to his former career of sensational extravagance.

The news did not reach the ears of the corporation magnate until the morning of his sixty-fifth birthday when he entered as usual the chambers of his luxurious downtown offices, seated himself in the swivel chair at the head of the long mahogany desk, received the early edition of a daily paper his secretary presented, and read with subdued emotions the disgraceful lines of a half column of ripe scandal.

Two hours later his secretary, Whitcliffe Dryden, returned from a special mission and announced himself at the portals of the private chamber.

"Sir," he said, bowing curtly, "I have visited the Union Trust Bank and the club residence of Mr. Meredyth, Jr. Here are the various reports you requested." He advanced



and solemnly presented a stack of official appearing documents. "And in the foyer is seated your son."

"You will show him here, immediately," came the deliberate reply in a calm tone. "And say to those who call, that I am not in."

Presently the revolving doors at the end of the chamber abruptly twisted open and into the archway frame there posed for a brief moment the immaculate figure of a young man with intensely blue eyes and hair the shade of chestnut. A sheepish grin curved his lips and his cheeks were flushed to an embarrassing pink.

"Morning, dad," he said tersely, advancing toward the figure that was apparently unaware of his presence. "Your man Dryden said you wanted me this minute. Anything important? I've got a date for breakfast at the Ritz, and I'd hate like the deuce to disappoint her."

"It's unfortunate, son," the magnate declared without lifting his eyes from the polished surface of the table, "but you had best telephone and postpone your engagement indefinitely. It will be impossible under the circumstances for you to execute it."

"Oh, now, dad—that's a terrible blow! Why, she's one of the most beautiful show-girls in New York. You wouldn't want me to give her the air in such a cold-blooded way, would you? Who can tell?—she might be my wife some day. That is, if she's sure I'm the heir to your millions." It was a brilliant but unsuccessful attempt to laugh it off.

"The telephone is here, son," the father indicated a nearby stand with a slight shifting of his eyes. "You will oblige me for once in a year—and use it."

A period of hushed uncertainty, then reluctantly the youth complied. Calling a Columbus number he was eventually connected with a fashionable apartment which over-

looked Central Park from a delightful corner in the Seventies. An anxious frown clouded his brow as he waited impatiently for a reply. Finally, after much finger nail drumming on the stand, a feminine voice responded.

"Hello, there! This is Gallop Meredyth speaking," he said. "Is Miss Delta in?"

A pause, then: "Gone to the Ritz for breakfast with me, you say? Oh, I'm sorry, but never mind, I'll catch her there. Good-bye."

Clicking the receiver on the hook, he turned and cast a sharp glance at his father. Charles Christopher Meredyth had listened to the brief conversation with cool, composed features. Brushing an unruly lock of silver streaked hair from his broad expanse of forehead, he set his thin lips in a determined line and waited sedately for his son's protest. It was not long in coming, for the bubbling pot of youth was evidently upset.

"She's the best little scout in all America," he declared, with exaggerated gusto, procuring his hat from the desk where he had tossed it upon arriving. "And she's not going to be kept waiting by me. Really, I'm sorry about this dad, but a gentleman, you know, never disappoints a lady. So long—see you later."

Without word or gesture, the senior Meredyth began a deliberate examination of the stack of official appearing documents his secretary had so recently delivered. The youth hesitated for a moment, obviously undecided, then he turned and started at a rapid pace for the revolving doors at the end of the paneled room. He had gone but half the short distance when they swung wide on their brass hinges, and permitted two rather brutal appearing individuals to step briskly in upon the thick Oriental rugs that carpeted the chamber.

"We're lookin' for young Gallop Meredyth," the more

aggressive of the pair harshly asserted, simultaneously jerking back the lapel of his serge jacket and displaying a silver police badge. "And I guess we've found him."

Amazed, the youth reluctantly retreated to his father and stood, tense and rigid, by the great swivel chair. Presently, Charles Christopher Meredyth set his documents aside, rose to his full height and faced the detectives.

"Gentlemen," he said, "just what does this mean—or rather, what is the charge against my son?"

"Manslaughter!" came the answer in a gruff voice. "And damn near cold blooded murder, Mr. Meredyth—that's what I'd call it."

"Incredible! Do you mean to say the fellow I punched last night died?" This came slowly, word by word, from lips that trembled. Beads of icy sweat formed on the youth's brow. Then he added: "That drunken cab driver—is, is dead?"

"Cashed in this mornin' at the Receiving Hospital," the aggressive officer declared. "Concussion of the brain. His last words named you, Gallop Meredyth, as smacking him. I guess you're in for it, kid." His lips curled beneath a defiant scowl.

A moment of silence, then: "Gentlemen, may I have a talk with my son before you take him? This is very serious, I realize." It was Charles Christopher Meredyth who spoke.

"Sure, Mr. Meredyth," the detective replied. "You're jake with us, but we'll have to put the cuffs on him, first. You, Lens," he nodded to his aide who stood at one side, "stitch him up."

Handcuffing the youth with links of steel, the obliging officers helped themselves to a generous assortment of imported cigars that reposed in a chest on the magnate's desk. Then they produced the regulation yawn in unison and disappeared behind the stained glass walls of an adjoining ante-room.



Left alone, father faced son. The youth sunk listlessly in the upholstered recesses of a deep chair. His head drooped. His eyes blurred in watery sockets and fixed themselves trance-like on the circles of steel. Spirit had fallen before overwhelming depression.

The father was the first to speak. Taking the morning newspaper in hand, he turned to the front page and riveted his eyes on a definite column.

"Son," he said, "now is a difficult occasion to discuss this—nevertheless, you will listen." Then, weighing his words, he read: " 'Millionaire's son in cafe scandal. Gallop Meredyth, son of the President of the Consolidated American Railways, was the feature in a drunken orgy last night at the Cobra Cafe in Greenwich Village. Acting in consort with Miss Lola Delta, chorus girl in the Midnight Revue, he was the outstanding personality of the risqué affair. Never before has the Village witnessed so brazen a splurge. Riotous merriment continued at a wild pace until early morning, when young Meredyth engaged in a fistic combat with a taxi chauffeur, sending the latter to the Receiving Hospital unconscious. All Broadway is agog today over this sensational return of the youthful spender to its gay midnight realm, and also the news has stirred considerably the emotions of Broad and Wall Streets, where yesterday the millionaire's son ceased operations as the head of his own brokerage establishment, which, so dame rumor declares, was a flat financial failure.' "

Repeating the final paragraph, the railway president crushed the sheet of paper between clenched hands, breathed a deep sigh, and eyed his son with a firm, deliberate gaze. A stray tear poised on the lash of his eye; then, quivering, it dropped and trickled across his ashen cheek in a tiny trail that glistened.

"A birthday gift from my—my only son," he said, "my



namesake, my heir." And then the heart of Charles Christopher Meredyth broke within him.

It was a matter of five full minutes before the railway president spoke again, during which limited period his repentant son gave vocal vent to all the pleas of forgiveness he could possibly command. And then when Charles Christopher Meredyth did finally speak, his words came cold, harsh and free of sentiment. The displayed emotions had vanished from his features, as had the dimness from his eyes. He was once more the grim financial magnate.

"I'm stating a fact, son," he declared, "a concrete fact. There is only one possible way out of this frightful mess, one manner of escape. It's not exceedingly honorable, I'll admit, but it is effective, and that's what counts now. Therefore, you will take it—Lord knows you've done nothing to deserve my sympathy, but you always were my failing, and I guess you always will be.

"According to these documents, here," he indicated the litter of papers with a gesture, "you have lost in the brokerage business \$41,000.00 in the past three months. Besides this amount, you have wasted by extravagant foolishness another \$20,000.00. On top of this you have ruined several of the best years of my life and caused the death of an innocent man. Altogether, as a failure, you have been extraordinarily perfect. I gave you your chance on the two greatest streets in the world, Broad and Wall, among the richest men in the world, and the most money in the world. You refused to listen to reason, to even accept advice. As a natural consequence you failed, utterly failed. So now, son, I'm going to throw the gears of your existence into reverse—you're going to have another chance all right, but of a quite different sort. You've had the finest—now you're going to experience the coarsest. From the realm of life, money and pleasure, you're going to a region of death, poverty and hardships.

“You will assume a name or title of your own choice, and until success, both in character and finance, has been fought and conquered, you will not see or communicate with me in any manner or form. Until I am absolutely satisfied of your triumph you are not mine—no more than a stranger, one of the throng. If you choose to fail on this last chance, this last straw to a drowning man, to the day of my death I will regret this move and never forgive myself for the error. Therefore, it is up to you, as my son, to fight and prove your worth, so that I, your father, may be saved this everlasting grief.

“All outstanding debts you have incurred, I will pay. And now I will arrange with the police authorities for your release, and with the press for the suppression of this fresh calamity. The moment these details of your freedom are accomplished, you will report to my secretary and comply immediately with the instructions he will issue. That is all I have to say, my son, except perhaps, that I wish you the best of a gentleman’s luck.”

## CHAPTER II

Should you choose to depart from a Santa Fe Pullman at the red brick terminal which is the most magnificent structure in Deming, New Mexico, and board the four-horse Elizabeth Ann Stage for the thriving border city of Columbus, twenty-two desert miles distant, you will journey, dusty and uncomfortable, for many hours and then approach in a jungle of cactus, yucca, sage brush and mesquite, the junction of three sand roads. Dell MacKenny, the grizzly driver, among many other more or less trivial things, will tell you that the road leading southward terminates at Chicca in old Mexico, that the road leading westward and vanishing on a blurred horizon is nothing other than a forgotten trail to nowhere, that the road straight ahead is the one we will follow around the Hermanes Range to Columbus, and that he himself (among five hundred others) was General Pershing's personal guide in the Pancho Villa campaign!

If it so occurs that you are possessed by an inquisitive mood or anxious for conversation in this lonely country, it is not at all improbable but what you will press this chauffeur of the sand trail for further details regarding the road that leads to nowhere. In this day and age roads that lead to nowhere are, to say the least, a curiosity and, for the most of us, present a romantic or adventurous possibility.

Dell MacKenny is an amiable old duck, and one of the extremely few conversationalists in a country of silent men. If he is sober, the yarn he spins about the forgotten trail is one you will repeat often. But there are times when he has leaned too heavily against the bar in Grogan's Saloon, and the wildest dreams of the wildest fanatic never paralleled

the soaring height his imagination climbs on these frequent debauches. However, you are doomed to verified facts and the truth, for on this particular afternoon as the age-battered stage rambles along the sand washed road, over which spreads the turquoise blue of the New Mexico sky, Dell is quite sober and therefore at his worst.

Slowly winding to the rim of a broad mesa, he draws in his steeds to a cattleman's trot, bites a fresh chew of odorous tobacco from a walnut plug, and points his lean arm to a hazy spot near the sloping base of a range of rugged mountains.

"That dark blotch over there at the foot of the Cabasas," he declares in the usual dull dialect, 'is what wuz once on a time the busy little city of Truceville—but it ain't no more. Nope, it ain't no more. Ye see, about a dozen or so years ago this bit of the country was a purty peaceful sort of place for humans to live in. Since the early days of Geronimo, the Injuns and bad greasers from Mexico wuz a raidin' in Arizona, and as the pickin's were right ripe, they left us over here dead alone. Come a day ten years ago when a feller named Granville Truce traveled out here from Pennsylvania, looked at that spot of desert, said it wuz just what he wanted, and to prove it, bought a few miles of sand and cactus and built himself a town. Inside of six months a Main Street with twenty buildings on each side of it, stood where there had been nothin' but nothin'. This here city builder from Pennsylvania named his town Truceville after himself and brought fifty families from the same place to populate it—a kind of religious crowd, I'd say.

"For a year the place prospered dog-gone nice and grew up from the cowboys' and ranchers' trade. Then Arizona's new rangers accomplished their sworn duty and spoilt everything. Over here the outlaws and bandits and cattle rustlers came in a flock. And findin' Truceville a handy sort of



gatherin' spot near the border, they staked their claims by the force of lead-speakin' six-shooters, and did everything but burn it down. Grafter Torso, a Mexican half-breed, built a big casino on the edge of the township and imported all the sins from rot-gut to women. After a year of gradually thinnin' population, due to the hell the bad greasers raised night and day, the big raid wuz pulled off there and at Columbus and every family left the spot in one move, except ole Granville Truce and his kid of a daughter. Back to Pennsylvania they went, so folks say, through with the damn desert forever, and that wuz the finish of Truceville as a city. It went to the dogs. From that day to this, over eight years, the old founder has had the town all to his lonesome. They say he's gone crazy as hell, an' I wouldn't doubt it. There's still some of the old gang of cut-throats hangin' out at the casino, and not a decent human among 'em. Jest the old man and his girl left alone with their town of forty vacant and decayin' houses. Well, friend," he invariably cracks the coiling lash of a bull whip, squirts a stream of tobacco juice on the stump of a passing cactus, and concludes with a weary yawn, "that's how she goes out here on the desert—you never can tell. One day life—next day death. Giddyap, Annie!" And off with a jerk into the vast sea of shifting sands gallop the painted ponies of the Elizabeth Ann Stage.

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In the sun-baked morning of a hot and dry Fourth of July, the forgotten city of Truceville lay sleeping in the accustomed mantle of its perpetual lethargy. From the rotting frame of the adobe plastered structure that called itself, by way of a faded sign, a Court House, to the irregular row of low, flat roofed shanties at the end of the single dirt street, not a sound or sight of life disturbed the dull serenity. Under the incessant boil of the New Mexico sun,

the one time bright paints that coated the various buildings, had parched and popped to a nameless color that was somehow remindful of tear stains on dirty cheeks. Slats were minus at frequent intervals from the wooden awnings that shaded the narrow sidewalks. Here or there a gaunt window with broken pane stared out on the drowsy stillness, while dangling unlatched, the wire screens had rotted to a rusty red. Innumerable discarded boxes and weather damaged implements lay decaying in the shallow gutter, and from the warped arches of open doors cobwebs hung undisturbed. It was the glorious Fourth of July in Truceville, and not even the mild murmur of a playful breeze acknowledged a greeting.

Presently, in the far distance, where the road that led to the desert junction lost itself in a dense mesquite rooted jungle of five-foot yucca plants, a winding column of dust rose spirally in the still air and swiftly drew nearer. Twenty minutes later a slate-gray limousine roared its twelve thundering cylinders down the deserted Main Street of the forgotten city and drew to an abrupt halt opposite the two-story structure of what had once been the thriving Happy Heart Hotel. A liveried chauffeur piloted this beautiful monster of symmetrical curves, and beside him with arms rigidly folded, sat an alert footman.

The instant a stop was effected the latter stepped to the ruts of the street and with trained dignity twisted the silver handle that opened the glass paneled door of the closed interior. For a moment the scene was entirely void of commotion. Then in rapid succession three russet grips spun through the air from the open door and landed one on top of the other in the thick dust of the street. A second afterwards the exceedingly peeved countenance of a young man appeared at the small door and scanned the row of dilapidated buildings as far in each direction as his position would

permit. A smile came to his lips and played on the lines of his face. Then he descended the single step to the street and turned, facing the limousine. Immediately the frail, bespectacled figure of a familiar clerkish appearing individual stepped briskly from the interior. His hand dived to an inner pocket, and drew forth two articles: The first a sealed envelope, the second, a one dollar bill in United States currency.

"It is your father's wish that you accept these," he said. And then, shoving them into the young man's hand, he bowed curtly and re-entered the dim recesses of the limousine. Several minutes later only a rapidly vanishing streak of dust marked the abrupt departure of Whitcliffe Dryden, personal secretary to Charles Christopher Meredyth.

For a while the youth stood motionless in silence and watched with a grave expression the swift disappearance of the speeding limousine. Then he grinned, surveyed with twinkling eyes the scene of decay on every side of him, and said, in a voice that mingled both humor and admiration:

"Dad, old top, you're a brick, a real brick! No one on God's earth could have thought of this but you. 'From the richest street to the poorest, from wealth to poverty, from pleasure to hardships,'—and darn if you haven't done it!"

Reading the almost obliterated sign above the partly ajar portals of the Happy Heart Hotel, the young man stuffed away the bill and envelope in a side pocket, took his baggage in hand and entered. A dismal sight met his eyes. From the low ceiling nets of tangled cobwebs hung in grotesque array. A thick mantle of gray dust coated every visible piece of furniture. On the clerk's desk the cash register reposed in penniless disuse, while the glass in the adjoining cigar counter had been shattered and strewn over a score of empty containers. On the cheaply papered walls



were the usual gilt frame pictures, all the worse for dirt; and what scattered bits of decorations remained, had been rudely upset or thrown heedlessly aside. It was obvious that the lobby of the Happy Heart Hotel did not in manner or appearance verify its pacifying title.

The young man lazily arranged his baggage in a presentable stack, crossed the creaking board floor to the desk, and from the surface lifted the last sheet of an age-worn register. Procuring a silver fountain pen from a vest pocket, he scribbled below the final entry, a single line. It read:

"John Doe, Limited,—New York City."

Then he laughed, plugged the dollar-marked key and rang up on the cash register the total amount of his fortune. After that he deposited the green-backed bill in the empty till and leaned back with a forced display of proprietorship against the ruin of the filth strewn counter.

"Well, Mr. John Doe, Ltd.," he said, "we are now prepared for business—bring on the traffic."

And then at this timely instant the sagging portals that opened to the street creaked on rusty hinges, and without pomp or ceremony in paraded the desired traffic. "Hello," the traffic said, and started toward the desk. For a brief period the youth stood frozen in silence and stared with blinking eyes. Then he roused himself and noted, with no small amount of curiosity, the weird details of the strange character that drew nearer. Apparently, the man did not take into consideration the actually astounding fact of his own presence. His entire bearing was vague and reminding, somehow, of a desert mirage.

The firm of John Doe, Ltd., looked him over thoroughly. From under the wide brim of an early day Stetson, a pair of blurred eyes, pale and expressionless, focused their lenses in the general direction of the newcomer, but yet they seemed quite unaware of his existence. The iron gray hair,



darker beard, and hollow cheeks, coupled with the frail figure and sunken chest, placed his age in the vicinity of sixty. His costume was conspicuous by its style and patch-work, and consisted chiefly of a mammoth swallow-tail frock coat that disappeared from display windows in the year 1890 or thereabouts. From his neck dangled a flowing cravat of black satin, while knee-high russet brogans encased the baggy folds of his corduroy trousers. With all his innumerable patches and quaintness of garb, there clung about him, nevertheless, a distinct aura of dignity. His expression was, above everything, kindly. It would have been almost impossible, even on initial sight, to imagine him involved in an action void of honesty. His very carriage suggested the Ten Commandments. Yet it was apparent that he had been (by choice or necessity) a native for some years of the Southwest, for those true marks of the desert were woven too deeply in his demeanor to be mistaken.

Bewildered, Gallop Meredyth, alias John Doe of Gotham, gradually recovered from his spell of mental numbness sufficiently to attain a slight resemblance of his usual composure, and was on the immediate verge of replying with a word of greeting, hackneyed or otherwise, when the odd character brought his lips to a smile and spoke once again.

"Howdy, brother Thompson," he said, nodding his head in the general direction of the youth, but evidently seeing through him to some acquaintance. "Thought I'd drop in an' remind you that today's the day. But at that, I guess there's no need fearing you'd forget anything as important as this affair happens to be, is there?"

Nodding as though agreeing with a reply, he calmly walked past the amazed young man and paused not a pace away at the rim of the vacant cigar counter. Then, as though suddenly hearing his name called, he abruptly turned and waved his hand in a gesture toward a bare table and empty chair. A merry twinkle came to his kind eyes.

"Well, if it ain't old man Benson!" he cried. "Thought you said you were going to have your appetite satisfied at my house next time you rode in, instead of ruining your abdominal cavity here? But then, on the other hand, why should I wonder? The reason is plain as daylight, and wetter than water."

Chuckling, he cast a wink at the dilapidated remains of a glass littered bar. Then he added: "Even the most noble and honorable cities do have their beverage drinking denizens. Therefore, Stephen Benson of the Double Bar X, you are permitted with due apologies to remain, and also to have a chat with me at the office before you leave for that cow raising mecca of yours. Now, remember, Ben, we meet at the office, later."

He turned and faced the cigar counter again. His gaze searched the tobaccoless tray. "Never mind, Thompson," he said, "I'll get it, myself."

Sliding back the glassless lid of the nearest container, he selected what was apparently a fat cigar from an empty box. This imaginary cheroot he placed between parted lips, closed the lid over the container, and began a diligent search of his numerous pockets for a match. Unsuccessful, he smiled toward the dumfounded Gallop. This time the hazy blur had disappeared from his eyes and he spoke directly to him.

"You'll have to give me a match, Thompson," he said; "must have lost the box I got last night. Or perhaps Grafter Torso's gang got 'em—that pack of greasers would steal anything, you know."

On the spur of the moment, whether humorously inclined or impelled by the request, he never knew, Gallop drew his monogrammed lighter from its silver socket and handed it over. The strange character accepted it with a murmur of appreciation and after enacting the movements necessary

to illuminate his imaginary cigar, he threw it to the floor as he would have a burnt match. Incredible thoughts throbbed incessantly in Gallop's mind. And after stooping to retrieve the discarded torch he found himself staring about the deserted lobby in hope of finding some person he had heretofore overlooked, or of uncovering a plausible solution to the intriguing problem. But then again the man's words roused him.

"I think it best, Thompson," he was saying, "that you do not attend the meeting arm in arm with me. We'll spring a bit of surprise on the boys—not a one has guessed I selected you. So instead of coming up the front way with me, you go around behind the jail and climb the stairs to the rear room of my office. I've left it unlocked. So you enter and wait close by the door that opens to the council room until you hear me call your name. Then you come on in. How's that? A little different from what they'll expect. And besides, if they've got a kick to yell, it'll save you the embarrassment of listening, understand? I thought you'd agree."

Drawing a length of tarnished chain from a vest pocket he presently fixed his pale eyes on the stained dial of a huge, gun metal watch. "Nearly eleven o'clock," he declared. "We're due in ten minutes, Thompson. And now for the sake of Truceville, don't be late and don't back out!"

So saying, he took Gallop's limp hand in the grip of his own and shook it heartily.

"You're just the man we need," he declared. "A man among men." Then, before Gallop was able to protest, or in fact, speak, the strange character blew an invisible puff of smoke from the visionary cigar and strode through the doors to the silent street.

With a mighty sigh of relief, Gallop steadied his physical self, but his mind refused to surrender, and thus it was that



for the better part of five minutes his thoughts and emotions fumbled riotously with unanswerable questions and arrived at no definite decisions. Nevertheless, he was unable to resist the fascination that possessed him, so he presently found himself behind the brick wall of a building with iron barred windows, climbing a rickety stairway, and finally entering the dingy square of a ten-by-ten office. The single decoration was a framed Chemist Decree, which hung on a plaster wall above the one piece of furniture—a roll-top desk. On equal terms with the lobby of the Happy Heart Hotel, the predominating commodity was a thick covering of sifted dust, which lay heavily upon everything, from the uncarpeted floor to crevices in the ceiling.

Following the explicit directions, Gallop crossed to a door that led apparently to an adjoining chamber. This he slightly opened and peered in. At the same moment, the sound of footsteps became audible, and presently the aged individual entered from a hallway. In the arch of the doorway he paused for an instant.

“Greetings, gentlemen,” he said, removing his hat and bending his head in a dignified bow. “I am pleased to see there is not a single absence among the members of our Council—pleased for the reason that today is a day that will live forever in the annals of Truceville history.”

With that, he hung his hat on the missing hook of a tree rack, and evidently failed to notice its instantaneous tumble to the floor. Then he crossed to a chair at the head of a long table and seated himself. All the formerly displayed traces of humor that possessed him in the hotel lobby, had left his countenance, and now his manner was business, through and through.

Unable to see clearly from the slender crevice in the partly ajar door, Gallop shifted his position to a point of vantage and widened the crack by an inch. Then he permitted his gaze to scan the chamber.



It was a large room, and in far better order and condition than the lobby and dismal hole he had recently left. Behind the seated individual, a trio of unwashed windows peered down a single flight to the slumbering street. A colored and framed reproduction of a painting of George Washington stood majestically on the ledge of a wide mantel, beneath which sat a small safe, open and apparently free of contents. The table, where the strange man had seated himself, was of a type familiar to the consultation chambers or conference offices of a dozen years past. Scattered around it were six rather comfortable looking chairs, and from these to the figure at the head of the table, Gallop switched his gaze.

Rising with several pages of finger-worn manila paper in his hand and propping one palm on the surface of the table, the odd character cleared his throat and spoke.

"Members of the Council of the City of Truceville," he said, "order is called in this meeting." Then after a pause and glance at the sheets of paper: "We are faced by a crisis unparalleled in our brief existence as a community. To tell you how vastly important this week, beginning today, the tenth of March, 1916, is to Truceville, is to tell you that unless we pass throughout the week unmolested by the plundering gangs of outlaws and murderous bandits who have within the last few days congregated in amazing numbers across the border from Columbus and thereby placing us, so close at hand, in a very dangerous predicament, there will cease to be a city of Truceville. For as you all know very well, we are now tormented to the limit of endurance by the continually riotous conduct of Grafters' greasers, and Truceville needs but one more blow of this sort to ruin it forever as a decent town where decent citizens may live in peace.

"To me, gentlemen, the name of Truceville means a great

deal more than you probably suppose. The fact that I founded it, bought and paid for every inch of its property, planned and built each and every one of its houses, that I am and have always been its Mayor, means not so much to me as the sentiment of it.

“When three years ago I spent a fortune in erecting Truceville, advertising its free houses and opportunities, importing its inhabitants and installing them at a personal expense in the life and trade of its tiny world, I honestly tell you that there was no mercenary idea or get-rich-quick scheme behind it. Nor did I at that time see the great possibilities of the desert. Although in my profession, chemistry and science, they are seldom encountered, I am a dyed-in-the-wool sentimentalist, a dreamer.

“Since twenty-five years of age, my one dream, my only goal, my single ideal has been the erection of a city like the original Truceville, the Truceville of the days before the Casino and Grafter descended like a plague among us. That was the ambition of my life.

“You ask why—for the reasons, the details and such? There is nothing startling about them. I had the idea that William Penn once had. The most beautiful flowers blossom from the finest of seeds. Therefore, why couldn’t there be a perfect community, a city of honest and faithful souls, if they, too, were planted with care from the finest seeds?

“How I personally traversed back and forth the greater share of Pennsylvania in search of inhabitants for Truceville, how I presented free leases and full transportation to those I found who were in sympathy with my plan, and how I sowed the fine seeds for my model community by careful and diligent selection of my population, is a story familiar to all of you gentlemen. And how it soon came about, when Truceville was growing and progressing splendidly, that Arizona drove the rustlers and bandits from its

molested boundaries, and these cut-throats found our city situated so that fleeing across the border to Mexico was but an hour's ride, and therefore selected it as their haven and rendezvous, is likewise an old story. But these facts I am reciting again for a concrete purpose, a purpose, gentlemen, you will soon recognize.

"With the arrival of a letter by yesterday's stage mail, Grafter Torso and his band of cattle rustlers have cost us a sum so great as to be almost uncountable. I have been informed that the Santa Fe will not construct the branch railroad to Truceville, as they originally planned. They quite frankly attribute this change in decision to the unruly and derogatory name that has been unfairly stamped upon us by the atrocious incidents bred from the crafty plans of Grafter and executed by his obedient thieves. I don't in the least blame the Santa Fe for their change of decision. Since the building of Grafter's Casino on the edge of our, at that time, peaceful city, eight months ago, we have had two sheriffs, one deputy and seven citizens murdered in cold blood on our main street.

"There have been innumerable robberies, and gun fights, galore. At first, we were able to resist this descension of outlawry by force and the authority of the law, as you know. But as the crowd at the Casino rapidly grew to a mob of fifty or more bloodthirsty greasers, our power gradually decreased, until today finds us a vile hell-hole for the Mexican bandits and derelict wastrels of the entire Southwest, to say nothing of being on the trembling verge of forfeiting our charter as a township, and without a third of our original citizens.

"No, gentlemen, I do not blame the Santa Fe for the action they have taken. And they surely must have investigated conditions here thoroughly for, as you know, they purchased twenty-five acres of desert from me eight months



ago, whereon they intended erecting a station and large shipping yards, and no organization as efficient as the Santa Fe is going to wilfully lose money if there is any possible remedy that will save it.

“They see no light in the future for Truceville, so they reverse their decision, which, gentlemen, is very discouraging to us all. But yet I, as one, am not wholly disheartened. I firmly believe there is still a fighting chance for Truceville—a slender chance to win. We citizens gathered here, members of the Council and Mayor, have our businesses established locally after untiring labor, continual strife, and a hard, uphill battle that has been fought and won, personally, by each of us. Now we face defeat. And, gentlemen, we must not surrender without a prolonged, if necessary, and ferocious fight. Two days have passed since our Sheriff, Steve Dorsay, one of the finest men I ever knew, was killed by a greaser’s six-shooter. And that is one of the purposes of this gathering—to appoint a man to take his place. A man who will not be lenient with those who have wronged, a man who will not fear Graftor or his gang, and above everything, a man who will kill, if necessary, return shot for shot, till Truceville is once again the model community of its infancy days.

“From what remains of our trusted citizens, I have with much deliberation and confidence selected a man whom I believe capable of controlling our city and holding it within the bounds of law and order. He is a man who, although hardly more than a youngster in age, has traveled far, seen lots, and felt more. He is not one of the original Truceville inhabitants, and when he first came to us a year past, I think, with all due respect to him now, that as a whole, Truceville did not approve of his authoritative manner, nor welcome, what we should have titled youth, instead of egotism. However, gentlemen, that is in the far past and it



is today that concerns us vitally. He is frankly the one man in our reduced population that has the ability, the nerve, and the out-and-out guts to stand up and battle against this predicament our city verges upon. To be truthful, you gentlemen know little about this man whom I have chosen, but I promise you I have chosen a fighter if ever there was one, and a man among men.

"Now is one of the greatest moments of my life as I present to you the man in whose hands rests the destiny of Truceville, the man whom I feel will deliver us safely from a grave impending disaster, the man himself, Darcey Thompson, Sheriff of Truceville, by Mayor's appointment."

Nodding, with the last word, toward the doorway that led to his rear chamber, Granville Truce, founder of Truceville, indicated the man of his selection. And into the room at the indicated moment and spot, stepped the disgraced son of Charles Christopher Meredyth.

There was not a twinkle of humor in his eyes—quite the opposite. Beneath a slight frown, his face held an expression of firm, determined seriousness. All the merriment had departed from his demeanor—that was obvious—and it is quite possible, yes, very likely, that he trembled with the urge to fight, as, often, real men do.

### CHAPTER III

For the immediate moment that succeeded his introduction of the new sheriff, Gránville Truce held a silent pose. Then, his eye fastened on the figure of the youth who stood awkwardly in the doorway, he moved his fingers in a beckoning gesture and spoke.

"Gentlemen," he said, weighing his words carefully, "are there any reasons why Mr. Darcey Thompson should not hold the office to which I have appointed him?"

Another moment of silence, then: "I am pleased with your acceptance of my selection and I honestly feel that Mr. Thompson is also pleased and will honor everything I have claimed for him. With your permission, I will now swear him in."

On the street below, a Mexican wearing an oily sombrero, drew his trotting pony to a dead halt and glanced upward at the second-story window of a frame and plaster structure in time to behold an elderly man pin a glistening badge on the breast of a mere youth and fasten about the waist of the latter, two ugly revolvers of high caliber and a loaded belt of cartridges. This was enough for the astonished Mexican. Planting the silver spurs in the ribs of his steed, he lurched to a fast gallop and was soon lost in a turn of the street.

In the Council Chamber above, Gallop Meredyth, alias John Doe, Limited, of New York City, alias Sheriff Darcey Thompson of Truceville, New Mexico, was experiencing the puzzling effect of a perplexing frame of mind. To describe or list the conflicting emotions that surged through his system is an utter impossibility. Out of it all he came to only one fact: He had been duly sworn in by the apparent

Mayor of the city as the Sheriff, and therefore, in all probability and according to the law, he was the Sheriff. Why this had all occurred or for what reason, came under the title, "Unanswerable Problems," and Gallop for the instant was content to let it go at that. He was interested more than anything in what the Mayor was saying, and in the advice he was giving.

"That's my firm opinion, gentlemen," Granville Truce declared. "That's one of the main reasons why our community should be preserved lawfully. I'll venture to say there is more money to the square foot around here than the finest gold mine in the West produces. And furthermore, it is not to be made in either minerals or oil. It is as yet a new, undeveloped commodity, absolutely never marketed previously, and as soon as we can clean up Truceville and I am able to devote time to chemical tests and laboratory experiments, I will share with you gentlemen the secret of a remarkable product. If ever it can be perfected, there is millions in it for us all. And that alone, casting aside determination and sentiment, is enough to make us fight for the freedom and peace of our community. It is needless for us to tell Sheriff Thompson that he may expect our sincere aid—he knows just how and where we stand. Therefore, gentlemen, with your consent, this meeting is now adjourned."

Throughout it all Gallop stood motionless and quiet, undoubtedly impressed by the Mayor's statement. Why under the sun he should be impressed was as vague in his mind as the fact that he was Sheriff. Since his first year at college he had done his utmost to satisfy a more than average young man's passionate desire for some sort of unusual excitement or fiction-like adventure, and with the exception of infrequent wayward strays from the beaten path he had encountered really nothing that might actually be consid-

ered unique. Manhattan had failed him—and here, in this decayed dropping-off place at the end of a forgotten trail, he had experienced in one hour more original action than the previous events of his twenty-three years combined. With this under his hat, Gallop was a bit more at ease. It somehow removed the predicament angle from the situation and left only the spirit of adventure. But as yet, further movements on his part were undetermined; he decided to encourage nothing and accept whatever came.

And it was not long in coming, for at that particular instant the elderly Mayor assumed, without apparent foundation, a ghastly expression and leaned back weakened against the table for support. His eyes bulged to their widest extent and Gallop was about to come to his assistance, when with a gasp, he cried aloud.

“Good God!” came his shrill words. “They’ve done that? They’ve burned Columbus? Pancho Villa!—and are headed for here? No! No! There’s some mistake. There must be! There must!”

Then ensued a long frightful minute of silence in which icy beads of sweat broke on the brow of Granville Truce, and Gallop, startled by this fresh situation, found himself scrutinizing the chamber for a possible answer. None did he discover. And then, portraying vividly the acute danger his last utterance foretold, the Mayor stuttered something inaudible about fleeing from Pancho Villa’s bandits to the shelter of the Court House, and grasping his hat from where it had fallen, complied speedily with his own suggestion.

After pausing to light a cigarette, Gallop took his time and followed at a leisurely pace. The pleasing aroma and stimulating effect of the nicotine calmed his emotions, occupied his thoughts, and above all, prevented him from functioning his mind, which was fortunate, for he was in no mental condition to think clearly.



Reaching the doorway that led to the street, he shoved it wide open and stepped out on the narrow sidewalk. In rapid succession three thundering shots rang out in the still air and when he finally picked himself up uninjured from where he had dropped by instinct of self-preservation, he found a hole the size of a lead pencil in his hat, the butt of one of the recently acquired revolvers shattered in its leather holster, and the light shot off the tip of his cigarette, which was, he thought, going a bit too far without introduction.

"So you're the new Sheriff?" Gallop heard a snickering voice behind his back inquire. "The new savior of Truceville—well, I'll be damned! Why didn't they pick a valentine and be done with it?"

Brushing the dust from his clothes, he turned about and faced the speaker, and then immediately shifted his gaze, for one glance at the mammoth bulk was sufficient. In the creation and designing of this specimen the Lord balanced his ledgers with a thousand beautiful women. "If this is Graftor Torso," thought Gallop as he waited nervously for the next move, "anything anybody has ever said about him is more than true—it's verified on face value."

"How's business, Mabel?" the question seeped from lips that chuckled; the jet eyes beneath the low, corrugated forehead blinked in amusement. "Just playin' at Sheriff, son, to entertain yourself, or are you figurin' on departin' from here in a box? I'm always interested in nice young fools like you, sabe? Hate to see 'em get mutilated. So tough on the other females, ain't it?"

"From the gun in each hand and the cigarette in your mouth, all three smokin', I take it you did the recent shooting, and I arrest you in the name of the law for attempted murder. Hand over your guns and reach for the sky,—be quick!" Gallop literally shot the demand.

For a moment the huge Mexican grinned, then his lips

curled to a raw sneer and his complexion faded to a light oily hue.

"I'm Grafter Torso of Arizona," he growled, "an' I don't play with kids like you, sabe? I'll give you just fifteen seconds to beat it—or by God, they'll carry you away!"

"I told you once you were under arrest," Gallop advised, hoping against hope that his bluff would succeed, for he realized in actual combat he was no match for the bandit, "and unless you also want a charge of resisting arrest against you, you'd better come peacefully and come now."

"Say, listen, gringo," the other snarled, "I sabe what's wrong with you—your family when they raised you were taking a correspondence school course in physical culture, and you, like a genuine sap, got your sister's mail by mistake. Now, don't give me a yes or no, and I'll allow you to leave town altogether. But any more of this tellin' me what to do stuff an' I'm liable to damage you way beyond repair. Take a tip, kid, and clear out—now scoot!"

Gripping Gallop's tweed coat by the lapels, the towering Mexican held him in a firm grasp. His eyes narrowed to sparkling beads. "You hear what I said?" he repeated. "Now ship your freight!" So saying he jarred the youth with a rough jerk and flung him with no effort whatever to the dust of the street.

Without a murmur of protest Gallop rose and unfastened the thick mahogany-tanned belt that circled his middle, then he removed the metal badge of authority from his breast and threw off his light jacket.

"Whenever you're ready, you dirty snake," he growled with forced boldness, clenching his fists and settling in a fighting pose, "stand up here like the real man you wish you were, and take the worst beating of your filthy life."

The only reply was a sneering gurgle, which disheartened the youth not a little, for he recognized the futility of a fistic

encounter with the bandit and was depending upon a stiff bluff to extract him from the dangerous predicament. However, the Sheriff of Truceville was doomed to disappointment, for the muscular outlaw removed his own paraphernalia, guns, canteen and pearl handled stiletto, and with an exchange of very few but powerful blows, humbled the youth to an unconscious mess on the dust of the street. Then he calmly rolled a brown papered cigarette, recovered his weapons and rode away on a sorrel mare that had been tied to a hitching post across the street in front of the hotel.

## CHAPTER IV

It was a dry, sultry morning, even for July on the border, when the recently appointed Sheriff of Truceville awakened from a forced slumber of numerous hours and after blinking his eyes and clearing his head, looked about, more or less bewildered. What primarily gained his interest were the clean white folds of an exceedingly neat bandage which circled his forehead. This instantly set him to thinking about the extent of his bruises, and wondering what had occurred succeeding the terrific uppercut which had found its mark on the vital point of his chin. Perhaps he was a captive in the grip of the Mexican bandit, Grafter Torso. This probability was dispelled by a survey of his surroundings. Apparently he had been carried to the bedchamber of a private residence. Pictures of a rather decent style hung from the plaster walls and on the floors bright colored Navajo rugs were arranged with care. No, he decided, this would hardly be the rendezvous of an outlaw. More likely the home of a law abiding citizen. But then, where would one find such an abode in the remains of Truceville?

This problem dominated his thoughts until the sound of footsteps became audible and presently a door at the far end of the room opened. Gallop rose on a doubled elbow and faced the doorway. Then he stared. But it was not until he pinched himself several times and rubbed his eyes in amazement that he was convinced of the actuality of what he beheld. That such a delicious morsel of feminine beauty as the youthful creature who advanced toward him, could possibly exist so far from Broadway as the desert of New Mexico, was to Gallop an absurd, incredible impossibility.

Her hair was intensely black, a glossy jet, he eagerly ob-



served ; her eyes a turquoise blue, with long dark lashes ; her figure small and boyish. Somehow, after what he had so recently witnessed, she seemed of a different and vastly opposite realm. In a single moment his mind had been washed of the grotesque old man who conversed with invisible beings, the snarling bandit who shot so accurately and the forgotten street of dead houses. And now it was being soothingly bathed in a solution of unimaginable bliss.

"Are you feeling any better?" she anxiously inquired, a smile curving her red mouth. "I certainly hope so. Both father and I have been terribly worried."

"Why, why yes," Gallop finally managed to stutter, not entirely recovered from the blow the appearance of the girl dealt him, "but I didn't imagine my defeat meant anything to anyone so, well, so nice as you. If I had, I think I would have fought harder. Yes, on second thought I know I should have."

"That's awfully kind of you, Mr., Mr. — — —"

"Thompson," Gallop lied glibly, recalling the penalty his father imposed, "Darcey Thompson, Sheriff of Truceville by proxy. And now that introductions are in order, you are Miss — — —?"

"Truce," she replied, "Pauline Truce. You see, Mr. Thompson, I'm responsible for your—your accident. It was my father who got you in this horrible mess, and, well you understand, anything he does that's not just right, I always try to repair or make amends for. Father, I'm sorry to say, is not the man Truceville once knew him to be. I do hope, though, you'll forgive us, Mr. Thompson. And if there's anything either of us can do to make you comfortable, I really wish you'd let us. Is there?"

"Yes, Miss Truce," Gallop answered, "promise you won't leave this room. Or, if you do, that you'll come back. Promise?"

"Why surely, Mr. Thompson. I intend to stay with you until you're able to get up. I'd hardly advise rising for several hours, though. You must have suffered terribly. Is the cut on your head painful?"

"Now that you've mentioned it," replied Gallop, "I do recall a sort of tender spot somewhere above my eye. And now that you've also said you were going to stay with me till I'm able to rise, I find, after careful analysis, I will be confined in this very bed indefinitely—or nearly that long. Now, Miss Truce, see how you've affected me."

"As a physician, I fear I've erred," she laughed. "Nevertheless my promise will be faithful—even to eternity, or as you say, nearly that long. Now if you'll lay back and be quiet and let me put this pillow behind your head, I think you'll rest lots easier."

"Really, Miss Truce," Gallop declared, "I'm not hurt at all. In fact, to be truthful, with the exception of a racing heart, I never felt better in all my life. I'd much rather sit up and talk to you, if you don't mind, and then afterwards I'll take the air for a spell. That'll about straighten me out, I think. May I?"

"If you're positive your injuries are not serious, Mr. Thompson," came the reply in an anxious voice. "I'd feel terrible, though, if it developed you were real badly hurt."

"Now, Miss Truce, you just forget all this 'responsibility' foolishness," Gallop insisted. "You or your father are not to blame in the least for anything that's happened to me or anything I've done. I went into this affair solely of my own volition, and because I chose to. And now that I'm in, Grafter Torso and all the outlaws in New Mexico aren't going to find it easy to get me out, at least not until I'm darn good and ready to resign. There's one thing I'd like to ask: Is your father legally the Mayor of Truceville?"

"Father founded Truceville, and is the one and only

Mayor it has ever known. And until you came, the only resident citizen since a week after the raid at Columbus in March, 1916. Of course, there are a crowd of Mexican cattle rustlers and bandits who make the Casino their haven, but Truceville has never, and will never wilfully accept them. You see, Mr. Thompson, Truceville was originally a hobby of father's; an ambition. He lived for its success. Worked for it. Spent a hard earned fortune on it. And then, gave his mind for it. Father is, as you have undoubtedly recognized, hopelessly insane. It came upon him the day after Pancho Villa's bandits burned Columbus and raided us. He realized the final blow had descended upon the future of Truceville, and the thought of it unbalanced him mentally. From that day to this, he enacts every detail of the events that occurred on the day of Villa's raid, the day his ambition, his life work failed. Instead of progressing with the years, he has marked time, living incessantly the final day of his sanity—doing, saying and thinking as he did in those last few hours. Oh, it's pitiful, Mr. Thompson, it's heartbreaking! He tried so hard to make a model community of Truceville, he fought so bravely even to the climax, that it simply sickens me to realize what's come of it, or rather, what his fate has been. When a person has had no mercenary object whatsoever in mind, and has always done the honest thing, as I know father has done, it seems frightfully unfair that a life of imbecility should be his reward. But then I suppose we should not criticise those things. Somehow, it seems justified in this case, though."

A brevity of silence, then: "I've probably annoyed you terribly with all this uninteresting sentiment, Mr. Thompson," the girl added, "but I felt I owed you an apology and explanation of father's conduct, and I thought to tell you the story itself would be the simplest way out. If you've been bored, I'm sorry."



"Now after telling me in the sweetest manner possible, the most pathetic story I've ever heard, you go and spoil it all by accusing me of being bored. I'm ashamed of you, Miss Truce, especially when you take into consideration that I have no excuse under the sun for accepting your care or hospitality. No one influenced me to become Sheriff. Your father merely offered the appointment; I accepted. That's all there is to it, and unless you refrain from blaming it on your old daddy and apologizing to me, the first name I write on the jail blotter will be Miss Pauline Truce, daughter of the Mayor, jugged for insult and battery of his honor, the Sheriff. Now will you be good?"

"Well, I prefer silence to prison, Mr. Thompson," she answered in a demure voice, "so I guess you win. And besides, it makes me feel just wonderful to know you don't blame father. It seems as though everyone always has for everything that's ever occurred in his life. And really when he was himself there never could have been a kinder, sweeter or more thoughtful person in the whole world. I simply adored him, and I do his memory yet. And then who can tell, sometime in the future there might come a day when the threads of his life will untangle and again he will be the same wonderful father. I've promised myself never to cease hoping, and I never will, Mr. Thompson, not to the very moment of my death."

Gallop prepared to offer a word of comfort, but the utterance died in his throat. He waited until the lump descended, then: "You're a brave little girl, Miss Pauline," he said, "there's not many that would devote their lives to a person in your father's condition, and you deserve a lot more credit than you probably get. But then that's usually the way. If you don't mind my telling it—take my own case, for instance. I've never given up anything for anybody in my whole life, not a single thing, luxury or otherwise.



I've never suffered in anybody's shoes, cared for anybody's feelings, or gone out of my way very far to do them a favor. Yet on top of it all, I've never been bothered with a guilty conscience and I've always had a good time, done about as I pleased. So you see, this is an unfair world, no matter how you look at it."

A pause, a sigh, and then: "But now to get back to Truceville and your father," Gallop continued. "It is probably a question in your mind just what I'm intending to do. As I see it there is only one course open for me to follow. Here are the facts: You are unable to leave this deserted hole because your father is unable, or will not leave it. And your duty, naturally, is with him. I, by especial appointment, am the Sheriff. Furthermore, I like you immensely and I desire to be near you more than I desire anything. Therefore, duly sworn as the Sheriff of Truceville, the Sheriff I will be in every sense of the word. I will remain and I will fight. Better men than I have failed in this office, I realize—but somehow when I look in those great big blue eyes of yours, Miss Pauline, all I need to do to lick the enemy, is find them. Therefore with your permission, I'll have my hat, my guns and badge; I'm off for a glance at the scene of yesterday's affray, and incidentally to make my first arrest. I'll be going, Miss Pauline."

## CHAPTER V

In his initial day as Sheriff of Truceville, Gallop Meredyth accomplished several important bits of regularity. His primary action was to visit the dingy jail and the adjoining Sheriff's quarters and sweep them both. It was a matter of an hour's diligent labor to make their interiors even presentable, but eventually he finished the task, and concluded by discovering an unopened can of red enamel and painting, with broad strokes, a vivid sign. Completed, it read:

OFFICE OF DARCEY THOMPSON  
SHERIFF OF  
TRUCEVILLE

This he nailed over the door of the office on the street side. Then he searched every drawer in the desk that reposed within, and finally succeeded in uncovering the object he desired. It was a cardboard sign, evidently never displayed. Satisfied, he crossed to the door with the idea of departing, when a closed closet caught his interest and under pressure of search revealed an assortment of garments, typically Western. Selecting those in wearable condition, he effected a rapid change in costume, and presently the slumbering street echoed with the swaggering tread of a two-gun buckeroo, who carried a cardboard sign under his arm, wore a glistening badge on his flannel shirted breast, and exuded a distinct effluvium of authority.

In the shadow of the Happy Heart Hotel, Gallop encountered the Mayor. The latter called him Thompson, by name, and mentioned the fact that an individual had been shot earlier in the day in a rumpus at the Casino, and that perhaps the matter needed official investigation.

"Don't bother, though, 'Sheriff,'" he added, "if it's a greaser. The more we lose, the better for Truceville." Then he did a truly extraordinary thing. Apparently his unbalanced mind visioned a blind beggar sitting on the sidewalk against the wall of the hotel, for from an inner pocket he procured a thin dime, and dropped it with a smile in the exact spot where an outstretched hat would naturally be. The silver coin struck the cracked asphalt with a tinkle and rolled to the gutter of the street.

"Never fail with my daily dime," Granville Truce declared. "Live and let live, you know." Then he nodded a farewell and entered the lobby of the hotel.

For a moment Gallop stared at the dime in silence. Then again he continued his progress and soon afterwards passed the last shack on the edge of the township. In a sand hollow, hardly a hundred paces away, a group of low adobe buildings formed an irregular square. The largest by far, stood in the center, and above a string of wide doors that ran the length of its front, two gaudy signs, one in English, the other Spanish, marked it as Graftor Torso's Casino and Saloon. The smaller adobes were evidently occupied, for columns of pale smoke rose from plaster chimneys in the warm air, and about them hung an atmosphere of life.

Realizing the Casino would hardly open its portals for business until late afternoon or evening, Gallop advanced through the square of shanties to the main entrance. Here he paused and drew forth several nails from the bulge of a jacket pocket. Using a stone boulder for his hammer, he fastened the cardboard sign in a conspicuous place on the door. Then he stepped back and reread its bold lettering:

## —SHERIFF'S NOTICE—

UNTIL FURTHER PROCLAMATION IS ISSUED,  
THIS DOOR WILL REMAIN SEALED AGAINST  
BUSINESS NEGOTIATIONS. ALL COMMUNICA-  
TIONS WILL BE ADDRESSED TO THE CITY  
COUNCIL, TOWNSHIP OF TRUCEVILLE, STATE  
OF NEW MEXICO.

BY ORDER OF THE SHERIFF.

In pencil he scribbled a single line under the final notation. It read: "Darcey Thompson—July 5, 1922." Then he looked about and discovered he had been apparently unobserved during the entire incident; numerous signs of existence on each side, but not one human figure. He was undecided whether or not this pleased him. Nevertheless he knew to let well enough alone was usually the thing to do in most cases of doubt, so he turned on his heels and retraced his steps up the slope of the sand hollow toward the Forgotten City.

Nearing the line of dilapidated houses that bordered the main street, Gallop's path led close to a cluster of cross-marked graves, he had not previously noticed. His youthful curiosity aroused, he bent over and read the simple memorial carved in the nearest. And then a faint smile came to his features, broadened to a grin and thence to a chuckle so hearty as to fairly possess him.

BORN, NOV. 24, 1884 — DIED, MAR. 10, 1916.

HERE RESTS DARCEY THOMPSON,  
ADMIRABLE OF CHARACTER, BRAVE  
AT HEART, TRUE OF SOUL, WHO  
DEPARTED FROM OUR MIDST WHILE  
COURAGEOUSLY SERVING TRUCEVILLE  
IN THE HONORABLE OFFICE OF  
SHERIFF.



Gallop continued to smile until he seated himself at the desk in his recently acquired office, searched his discarded garments for the sealed envelope his father's secretary had presented, and finally located it in a side pocket of his tweed coat. From then until the interruption his attitude was intently serious. Dexterous fingers tore the paper folds and presently an important appearing document lay on the desk before him. In brief, Gallop learned, after much reading and more figuring, that a section of twenty-five acres of land, Plot 21—Block C., Truceville, New Mexico, formerly owned by the Santa Fe Railroad and transferred to the Consolidated American by mutual consent was now his personal possession by a direct deed from Charles Christopher Meredyth, payment already received.

This astounding revelation placed his Truceville rating in a new light, Gallop decided. Sheriff to begin with, and now a property owner, injected the necessary personal interest in the task he had taken upon himself, and also had the effect of erasing the thought of poverty from his mind. For a long while he thought about his father, his infinitely vast success, the great financier he had become, and wonderful man he had always been. And then came recollections of his own sensational escapades; vulgar occasions where he had angered and disgraced his father beyond forgiveness; of the last morning they were together; their parting. And finally thoughts of the man he had accidentally killed, crept in like a chafing burr and ruffled his mind unpleasantly. Yet somehow as he revisioned the facts, he did not in the least, or had not, since learning of the man's death, considered himself a murderer. The fight had ensued at the cab driver's instigation; the climax was nothing other than an accident—a horrible accident that could have occurred to most anyone. Whether a court of justice would find him guilty or not, failed to bother Gallop. He knew he was

innocent in every sense of the word, and that was quite sufficient for his conscience. When the opportune moment arrived (it was a fresh decision that came to him now), and all his father's requirements were successfully complied with, he determined to return, confess, and face the charge. Such an unconditional surrender would be the final test of his character, and Gallop was grimly sincere.

There had been born to him partly from the story of Granville Truce's wrecked career, partly from the years of devotion his daughter had sacrificed, partly from his love and admiration of his own father, and more than all, from his personal failure, a firm resolution, a definite determination to make a success. And, realizing, as he did, that the blood of Charles Christopher Meredyth ran through his veins, Gallop knew the devil and all hell wouldn't stop him and couldn't.

Disrupting his meditation, the echoing hoofbeats of a galloping horse suddenly became audible and rapidly drew nearer. The Sheriff of Truceville jerked his one remaining revolver from its holster and stepped quickly in the nearby closet, closing the door after him. By bending to his knees he was able to view the room through a rusty keyhole. This proved to be a valuable precaution, for with a splintering kick the door that opened to the street banged on its hinges and into the office strode the bulky figure of Graftor Torso.

A snarl baring his teeth, he drew his six-shooter, looked about disappointed, and then snorted in disgust.

"Beat it, has the gringo," he growled; "I thought so. Well, it's a damn good thing for him." Then, to curb the defeat of his expectations, he leveled the barrel of his revolver at the roll-top desk and began a fusillade. This amused him immensely until his supply of cartridges became exhausted. Then, breaking a chair over his knee for

added entertainment, he turned toward the street with departure in view, and was startled to find the steel tip of a revolver dangerously close to his stomach. A pair of cold eyes met his astonished gaze and, in them, Grafter recognized an icy gleam that was usually unhealthy for one to behold.

"Now that you're out of ammunition," Gallop grinned, "stick 'em up, Grafter. Not a bad move or you'll taste all six! And by the way, Greaser, hand over your implements of war. I'm sent here to collect bad men's toys—that's my hobby."

The bandit readily complied without a single display of resistance. Gallop produced a brace of chain handcuffs from the surface of the bullet ridden desk, and coupled them securely about the Mexican's thick wrists. With this important factor accomplished, he gagged his prisoner with a bandanna neck scarf, and prodded him into the cement recesses of the one cell in the adjoining jail. Then he removed a rustic stool, the only dangerous implement, and locked the frame of bars with a huge key that hung from an iron ring on a side wall.

"Don't get lonesome, Grafter," he said, "it don't pay—and besides, I'll not be far away in case you're ill or something. Remember that advice, greaser, and save yourself a lot of harm."

With that the Sheriff of Truceville looped the ring of keys over his arm, slammed the barrier that led to his office and sat himself once again at his somewhat demolished desk. So far the daily business had been acutely satisfying.

## CHAPTER VI

With his first arrest secure behind bars of steel, Gallop pacified his mind and considered the future. With one dollar in cash to his credit, and this now occupying an otherwise vacant till in the hotel cash register, his financial surplus was conspicuous by its absence. It was improbable that his recently received deed of property could be converted into an actual cash asset. In a forgotten city real estate would be an insulting gift, he decided, and the thought of sale, incredible. Therefore with all said and done, he was badly dented if not broke.

Accommodations, by way of living quarters, were another matter. While cleaning the office he had uncovered a folding cot with many blankets, and a stove with all necessary cooking implements, in a room that adjoined the jail from the opposite side of his office. Here he could establish his residence in reasonable comfort. But how, when and what his appetite was to be appeased with, continued to annoy him. Eating being a rather compulsory occupation, he racked his mind for a mode of satisfaction. With money he could probably purchase supplies from the Mayor's household, but how to extract money from a citizenless city was another problem. And then an idea came to him.

Shifting its intricate gears into immediate action, he re-entered the jail and again faced his sulking prisoner. The brooding Mexican scowled and rose to his feet from where he had been sitting cross-legged on a straw mat.

"Well?" he growled.

"Very well, indeed," Gallop replied, "and now that you are found guilty of disturbing the peace of the citizens of Truceville, I am forced to collect a fine of twenty-five dollars,



American money, from your person and release you. Or would you rather spend a similar number of days within these walls?"

It was obviously no problem for Grafter Torso. Lifting his beaded vest, he drew into sight a perspiration stained money belt. Counting out the sum in five dollar gold pieces, he shoved his hand through the frame of bars, and presently Gallop listened to the reassuring tinkle of gold against gold in his trousers pocket. Then he fingered his revolver and unlocked the strong barrier.

"I expect you, Grafter," he said, leveling his weapon, "to beat it and beat it quick. No funny business in or around Truceville again or I'll hold you as a permanent guest. I was sent here as Sheriff for an important reason, and the full extent of the law is behind me. You advise your gang to lay low—and remember it yourself. Now I'm giving you one minute less than two, to get on your horse and get out of my sight. I hope we understand each other. Now beat it!"

Cursing in a dull monotone, Grafter waived a reply and reluctantly complied with the firm orders. After mounting his sorrel mare he eyed the young Sheriff with a threatening stare and broke into a mirthless peal of laughter as he wheeled about, planted the spurs and rode away.

When the horse and rider were out of sight, Gallop latched the door of his office, and proceeded down the quiet street toward the two-story plaster building that was the residence of Mayor Truce and his daughter, Pauline. In all Truceville, this old fashioned but rather dignified structure was the single exception in the scene of decay. Only by continual preservative repairs may the shifting sands of the desert be controlled from destroying the work of man, and the Mayor's home had evidently not gone without diligent care. To be exacting, it could have hardly served in the restricted district of a city, but for Truceville it was magnificent.

Gallop advanced down the wide veranda to the door and rapped on the panel. The girl, Pauline, had apparently seen him coming, for she greeted him almost instantly. When they were seated in a large front room, done in rustic woodwork and affording a mammoth open fireplace and a vast selection of Indian pottery, the youthful Sheriff approached the question that predominated his thoughts.

"Miss Pauline," he said (somehow the Truce part seemed vaguely superfluous), "now that I'm here in Truceville to stay, I wonder if it will be possible for me to buy provisions from you until I find time to visit Columbus? I'm at present without a horse or means of transportation, and Columbus, I judge, is quite a walk. Can some arrangement be made?"

"Why, certainly, Mr. Thompson," came the reply. "I thought you knew that I have a little commissary in the bank building next door, or I should have told you this morning. You see, occasionally the ranchers or cattlemen patronize me, and then nearly every other week, Buffalo Jones, the old Cabasas hermit, pays me a visit for his rations. Since Truceville dropped all pretense of being a town, the small profit I make from the store and what vegetables I raise by irrigation are the means of our income. Father invested every cent he had in the world in the future of his city, and even now he owns practically every building and inch of Truceville, but as you know, Truceville property is quite worthless. But," she added, changing her candid gaze to a vague stare, "not so in his mind. Father imagines he's making thousands every year; that Truceville is what he built it to be. And nothing, not even poverty, will make him believe differently."

"I hope the time will come," Gallop offered after a pause, "when all his dreams will really materialize. Nothing in my mind could be as wonderful. And, Miss Pauline, I assure you, in every manner possible I will strive with such a goal

as my pinnacle. I, too, it so chances, am a property owner in Truceville—only of course on a much smaller basis. Perhaps,” this came as an afterthought, “perhaps you can tell me just where my property lies. As is the way with most sheriffs, I know little about my home town. Here is my deed.”

He produced the document and handed it over. The girl, plainly surprised at this unexpected revelation, scanned the typewritten lines. Then a pretty smile played on her lovely features.

“I can’t say you’ve the most magnificent site in town,” she declared, “but it’s surely sacred. You own the cemetery, Mr. Thompson, and the surrounding land. I think there are two shacks still standing on it—the morgue and what was once the Truceville Undertaking Parlors, both long since destroyed. Surely you didn’t buy this property with real money, Mr. Thompson?” The question came in an anxious voice.

“No, not quite that,” Gallop answered. “It was a gift to equal my capacity. The guilty party has numerous reasons, Miss Pauline, for this benevolent expression of such a comparison, so don’t judge him too harshly. Even tragedy, I once read, has a humorous viewpoint. And in this particular case I, the tragedy, am no doubt affording a certain person the said humor. To balance the ledgers, my obvious duty is to make a success of the land that is the foundation of this comparison, and thereby turn the tables, which is, at this moment, easier said than done, but now (please don’t laugh, Miss Pauline), not as improbable as you imagine. Frankly, for various reasons I will either make a success in Truceville, or, with all due apologies, join ranks with the Cabasas hermit. Why I’m telling you all this to begin with when you’ve only seen me twice and can’t possibly care about my welfare in the least, is more than I know. That’s one



of my many cultivated habits, Miss Pauline—talking too much. I apologize. And now for the subject of food.”

Surpassing the wildest of expectations, Gallop was cordially requested to consume his rations at the Truce table indefinitely, and it was only after insisting to the point of command that he forced the Mayor’s daughter to accept a weekly payment of ten dollars in advance. With genuine reluctance, she finally succumbed to his argument and pocketed the two gold coins he offered. Then she mentioned the lateness of the hour and departed for the kitchen, from where there presently seeped the wholesome aroma of cooking foods.

It had gradually grown dark during their conversation, and now only a reddish glow in the West marked the sun’s descension behind the rugged range of purplish mountains. Since Pauline’s retreat, Gallop had sat in meditation. Now he rose and stepped out on the broad veranda. His idle gaze traversed the lifeless street from end to end, and after a while settled on a bright spot in the distance that he knew to be the haven of Grafters’ renegades.

This set him to wondering about the actual extent of his authoritative notice, and planning his next move against those guilty of shattering the efforts and ambitions of an honest man. Although he had never previously aimed at a definite goal, Gallop clearly understood the tragedy of failure to those who have injected every ounce of effort in a task, and resentment for Grafters’ policy burned deep within him.

Disturbance of his thoughts came by way of Granville Truce, who presently appeared from the general direction of the hotel. When a recognition was effected, the Mayor waved his hand in greeting.

“Howdy, Thompson,” he called, “thought you’d drop around for dinner, tonight. You were due last evening. But then, you can’t expect a Sheriff to be on time, eh?”



"Nope," Gallop replied, "that's the way with us officials. We must uphold our dignity at any cost."

"By the way, Thompson," evidently a new thought had come to the Mayor, "I forgot to ask about what you think of my plan to convert the one blacksmith shop we're not using to a laboratory for my chemical tests. There's a lot of experiments I've got to make before I'll show any real result, and I might as well work there as anywhere. My implements came on the morning stage and I had Charley move them in. Like the idea?"

"Why, yes," Gallop was fully a minute in replying, "that's about as good a place as any." Then, his curiosity stirred, he ventured a question: "Just what do you expect your result to be, Granville? Will it really do as you say?"

"Do as I say?" repeated the Mayor, in a bewildered voice, "why I didn't say anything would do anything, Thompson. All I've ever claimed with forty years of science and chemistry behind me, is that there certainly must be a marvelous quality in any substance that shows the vital results and remarkable merits, from actual tests, that have been displayed in this particular product. Why, already in my foolish meddling without proper instruments, I've found a dozen things our little discovery will actually do. And without exaggeration, Thompson, there's no denying but what it'll go big as a money maker. I've thought quite a bit on the subject since we had our little private talk, and when I'm satisfied that my beliefs are right, you and I will organize our little company as we decided and go right after this thing in a big way. Best to make it a profit-sharing affair after the original idea of Truceville, I think, and include all the citizens on a percentage basis. What say?"

Undeniably baffled as to the identity of this extraordinary product, Gallop was gratefully relieved when Pauline appeared in the doorway at this instant and announced

dinner. From the Mayor's recent remarks he knew this certain commodity was not a mineral of any sort, and think as he would, he was unable to reach a conclusion concerning its character. However, he determined to investigate at an early moment and satisfy his curiosity if nothing else. Somehow though, there hovered about the thought of the old man's sincere belief in his discovery, something undefinable, something greater than curiosity, which possessed Gallop throughout the delicious dinner he consumed with much relish.

## CHAPTER VII

From the moment Pauline, with a delightful smile, indicated Gallop's place at the table, until they had finished the wholesome meal and adjourned again to the spacious front room, Granville Truce assumed and held a silent demeanor. The vagrant expression Gallop encountered on their initial meeting in the hotel lobby, returned to his eyes and about him there clung a dreamy atmosphere of utter resignation from worldly affairs.

Although both Pauline and the young Sheriff made constant attempts, they found conversation difficult with the lethargic figure in their midst, and finally mutually accepted the taciturnity as inevitable.

The dullness, however, was shortly doomed to diversion, for Pauline, quite by chance, retreated to the veranda with the intention of enjoying the cool evening air, and there a stupefying sight met her eyes.

In a flickering halo of crimson, scarlet tongues of fire darted from the roof of the Sheriff's office and illuminated the entire street. On the opposite sidewalk a throng of perhaps fifty Mexicans watched the destruction with dark eyes that twinkled brazenly in amusement. Beneath the wide brims of enormous sombreros, oily faces reflected the reddish brilliancy of the swiftly increasing blaze, and above the gradually swelling roar of burning timbers, harsh laughter rang out in the night air. Grafter, who stood nearer the flames than his henchmen, was easily recognizable; the others were little more than a sea of repulsive faces.

With a second glance, Pauline turned and fled to the house. In answer to a scream, Gallop met her in the doorway and one brief glance at the flaming scene of his

rapidly demolishing office, flashed an intricate plan of action on a mind that should have been, according to the natural laws of stupidity, dumfounded. In an instant, he scented a rare opportunity for retribution to overtake the transgressor. It was a long shot, he realized, but then as terrific odds seemed to be his present portion, Gallop prodded his courage and took it.

"No use interfering, Pauline," he said in a calm voice, "they're twenty or more against one of us, and a fight would only end disastrously. No chance for the adjoining buildings to burn; they're too far away, and besides, it's only me they want."

"You probably know best," came the cold reply, "but I always imagined a Sheriff at least attempted to do his duty—even if it was necessary to kill or be killed. Perhaps I'm wrong, though. Anyway, the original Sheriff Darcey Thompson faced a hundred of them before he quit."

"Quite true; I agree perfectly," Gallop declared; "I saw his grave this morning."

Resentful, Pauline turned again toward the doorway. "Good evening, Mr. Thompson," was all she said.

When the barrier had closed on her boyish figure, Gallop ducked through a short alleyway and thence into the dense jungle of cactus and yucca that surrounded the town. By a circling detour he finally reached the sand hollow where was the Casino and its square of adobes. Evidently the entire population had pilgrimaged to the burning of his quarters, for with the exception of several dim lights and a howling dog, Gallop found the rendezvous dark and deserted. Swiftly he advanced toward the rear portals of the Casino, keeping by way of precaution in the thick shadows. Once there, his movements were rapid and sagacious.

Close against the back wall, which was itself constructed of heavy planking, he discovered a large refuse box, piled



high with discarded trash. This was the object he desired. And from the standpoint of time, it consumed not longer than two minutes to select a stock of dry newspapers from the heap of filth, twist them to a torch-like wad, raise the corner of the box, stuff them beneath, apply the flame of a match, and beat a retreat that was truly remarkable for the number of paces progressed before the flames soared to an intensity sufficient to attract attention.

Reaching the edge of town, Gallop thought it best policy to avoid the throng of renegades, so he kept to the dark alleyways and proceeded directly to the Mayor's residence. The front room was dark, but in the rear—Pauline's chamber he presumed—a light glowed. Until now his intentions consisted of basking in the glory of his deed, triumphing over her resentment and accepting proffered shelter for the night. But now he hesitated, and as he did, an odd bundle on the steps of the veranda caught his gaze.

Under a clear ray of moonlight, Gallop read a note in scribbled handwriting which he found attached to the object he had first noticed :

MR. THOMPSON.

Sir :—I have reconsidered my invitation. Within this sack are provisions to the amount of ten dollars, already received.

I am sure father will be pleased to accept your immediate resignation as Sheriff.

PAULINE TRUCE.

\* \* \*

From over the jagged rim of the lofty Cabasas, dawn came to the forgotten city of Truceville, and but one of its three inhabitants beheld its preliminary rays. Gallop stood over a small blaze he had kindled in the forge of the deserted blacksmith shop, and looked through the long sliding doors

upon the scene of gray and amethyst, which, as the minutes passed, gradually blended to light and life.

On an improvised mattress of straw lay his jacket, hat and vest; in a battered frying pan the aroma from three thick slices of ham permeated the chilly air with an appetizing savor. Within a cleansed paint can, coffee boiled, and close to the red coals, a crust of fresh bread toasted itself to a delicious brown.

The son of Charles Christopher Meredyth, in this first personal preparation of nourishment for his abdominal cavity, verified the contested theory that cooking, like consuming, is an instinct, and not a habit. The breakfast Gallop prepared that cold dawn over a blacksmith forge in the city of vacant houses, will live forever in the annals of his private history. It was, so far, he decided, his crowning achievement.

Washing down his last bite with an immense gulp of coffee, as he had always read true Westerners did, Gallop faced the labor of the day with buoyant spirits even a range rider might envy. His initial task consisted of a careful and thorough search of the premises for a trace of the instruments Granville Truce had mentioned in connection with his marvelous discovery. After calmly overlooking them for all of ten minutes, his eyes eventually rested on an assortment of delicate test tubes, vase-like bottles, and numerous tiny devices he knew nothing whatever about. Unfortunately his college career leaned more in the direction of after-a-fashion society, than actual study, and he found, after a half hour's meddling, his knowledge to be extraordinarily lax in chemical problems.

Out of it all he gained but one fact: Formerly something had been in the tubes and bottles; it had dried and evaporated. This, he decided, was not exceedingly encouraging, so he surrendered in disgust and turned his thoughts to the necessary work at hand.

Acting on impulse he paid a brief visit to the remains of the fire, and found, with the exception of the cement jail, his quarters a total loss. Out of the charred mass of burnt timbers he was unable to recover anything of value, intrinsic or otherwise, so he turned toward his new abode again and was at that moment accosted by the Mayor, who greeted him from a distance and beckoned him. When they had drawn together in front of the hotel, the aged chemist proudly patted Gallop on his back and spoke.

"Excellent, Thompson," he declared, "excellent. I knew we could depend on you, and I guess, after last night, the Council will sit up and take a little notice, eh. That is, if they catch on."

"Yes, I'll admit it was fairly good," Gallop had not even the slightest idea in the world what the Mayor was commending, "but anyone could have done just as well."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that, Sheriff. I've just looked her over this minute and I'll say when you set that fire, you sure knew what you were doing. The whole rear burnt to nothing, and a good bit of the entrance. Furthermore, Sheriff, they don't even suspect you. From what I just gathered they think it started from accidental origin. Grafter's raising hell with 'em about cigarette butts and the like. I would never have guessed it was you who did it, but then when I put the fire of your office and it together, I couldn't think otherwise. Now don't spoil it all and tell me you didn't do it. You surely know how we stand—that you can trust me."

"You were right, Granville," Gallop replied, his mind ruffled not a little by this uncanny display of detection, "I wasn't even going to tell you, though. But now you're on—it's between us. Is that a go?"

"Why, certainly, Sheriff—that is, with the exception of Pauline. But now for our little work. When do you think



my instruments will arrive? It's been a month since I ordered them; they should have come in from El Paso last week."

"They came last evening," Gallop lied glibly, "I'm having them moved in the blacksmith shop now. They'll be ready for you to begin experimenting in an hour or so. Will you come then?"

"You bet I will, Sheriff," the Mayor answered instantly, "I'm all ready to shoot. And in the meantime I'm going over to the house and whisper the good news of the fire in Pauline's ear—she, and no one else, will hear it from me. Well," he added, "see you later."

Granville Truce nodded and continued down the street toward his residence. The Sheriff without a jail did not hesitate long. A faint idea had blossomed to a precise plan in his mind and he was eager to put it into action.

Retracing his steps, he presently entered the blacksmith shop and immediately went to work over the ill-used assortment of chemical instruments and tubes. Drawing water from a tank, as he had for his coffee earlier in the day, he filled a metal tub to the brim, and set it above the direct heat of a blaze he hurriedly kindled in the brick forge. When it came to a boil, he carried it to the long table at the end of the shop, where were the instruments. Then, and not until then, did the actual work begin.

One by one he washed the oddly shaped bottles, heavy jars and glass vessels. Then came tiny test tubes and devices not in his acquaintance. After these had been cleansed with effort and polished to a degree that verged newness, he once more searched the entire shop and discovered an assortment of Indian pottery, numerous packages of granulated substances, a transparent still that was remindful of a brewery, a weighing scale for accurate measure, and an iron mortar and beater, which, collectively, he judged to be



necessary implements. These he washed and cleansed in a similar manner. Then, after scrubbing the table, which was evidently constructed for a work bench, and dusting away the thick cobwebs, he placed the varied assembly in an orderly array, and stood back to view his work, satisfaction written in the youthful lines of his countenance.

There was a slender possibility the elderly chemist could be induced, under this pretense of originality, to begin anew his experiments where he had undoubtedly discontinued them previous to his affliction, and Gallop labored willingly, for he was determined to learn the identity of the mysterious discovery if it were in anyway possible. In the act of giving a finishing touch to the makeshift laboratory, by way of a pair of rubber gloves he had heretofore overlooked, the light tread of footsteps sounded at the ajar doors of the shop, and Gallop turned eagerly, hoping to find the Mayor of Truceville.

Posed in the large frame was the girl, Pauline. An anxious smile flushed crimson to her cheeks; embarrassment marked her every demeanor.

"May I speak with you, Mr. Thompson?" she asked. "That is, if you're not busy."

"Why surely, Miss Truce," Gallop replied advancing toward her, "won't you be seated?" Then in the next breath, noting the absence of chairs: "I mean I apologize for my humble quarters. You see, they were unexpectedly occupied and as yet are hardly presentable."

"That's perfectly all right. I just dropped in for a moment, Mr. Thompson. After learning of your wonderful accomplishment from father, I feel I owe you an apology for my absurd, my horrible conduct last evening. And I want you to know that I'm really sorry, that I realize the blunder is all mine, that I alone am to blame, and that I sincerely beg your forgiveness. It was an error only a

foolish person could possibly make. I was foolish last night—I am repentant now. Will you forgive me?"

For fully a minute Gallop failed to reply. His brow corrugated in meditation; his bearing was one of utter incomprehension. Then, his eyes blinking in a befuddled manner, he finally spoke.

"Really, Miss Truce," he declared, "I can't imagine what you mean. I don't recall any incident between us that deserves an apology. However, whatever it is you've apparently done, I surely accept and honor your plea." Gallop forced his most pleasant smile.

"Then you didn't receive my note?" This came as an incredible question.

"Note?" Gallop repeated; "possibly, Miss Truce, you have me mistaken with some one else. I can't seem to get the point, or are you joking?"

"Not in the least. Furthermore, I'm positive I haven't been mistaken in anyone's identity. I'm speaking about the note I sent with the provisions. Again I apologize for its contents. Of course, you remember now."

Again for a lengthy period Gallop held a befuddled silence. "It's strange, Miss Truce," he at last said, "but I can't for the life of me place the incident. Note?" he added, frowning at his stupidity.

"Yes—the note, the letter I pinned to the sack of supplies—your ten dollars' worth of provisions. About requesting your resignation as Sheriff, retracting the hospitality of father's house and all that childish sentiment. It's impossible to think you've actually forgotten." Evidently Pauline was becoming annoyingly perturbed.

"It's silly of me, I realize," Gallop offered, "but really, Miss Truce, I find no memory of any such occurrence in my brief Truceville history. Perhaps, as I suggested before, you've mistaken me for some one else. Nevertheless, solely

to please you, I welcome your apologies, and you may know whatever you've done to harm me, is surely forgiven. And now," he added, with an air of finality, "if you'll pardon me, Miss Truce, I must return to my work—it's almost noon, and much must be accomplished before nightfall if comfortable slumber is to be assured. Good-day, Miss Truce."

Her eyes flashing, the color gone from her cheeks, Pauline favored Gallop with a defiant glare, turned her back on him without a word, and abruptly departed in a whirl of angry emotions. It was a matter of five rollicking minutes before the Sheriff of Truceville was able to control his emotions, which rioted in merriment, and attain his usual serenity of mind and dignity of figure. And even then there hovered about his demeanor an obvious trace of jocularity.

For the wayward son of Charles Christopher Meredyth, it might be said that life was unfolding its problems in rather speedy fashion. Within forty-eight hours he had been deserted, practically penniless in a forgotten city; accepted the appointment of Sheriff tendered him by its Mayor; received a beating; met the most gorgeous feminine creature imaginable; arrested a notorious renegade; witnessed the flaming destruction of his office; tasted the spice of revenge; encountered an unknown discovery of vast possibilities; received due apologies; returned humiliation for humiliation, and now, the egotism in him, as is the way with youth, basked in the glory of his triumph.

## CHAPTER VIII

Although he waited with growing discouragement until mid-afternoon, Gallop's contemplated appointment with Granville Truce failed to materialize. Finally convincing himself that the Mayor's undependable thoughts were elsewhere, he strayed from the scene he had laboriously prepared and wandered with no fixed destination in mind. Presently, he emerged from the rim of the town and having nothing better to do, continued at a leisurely pace into the desert jungle of yucca and cactus. It was intensely hot, but Gallop seemed not to mind. The sun beat down from the pale New Mexico sky and in the distance created dazzling rows of heat waves which danced and played on the horizon, like the cool waters of some mountain brook.

Mounting a sand dune, bare of thorny vegetation, Gallop's idle thoughts were suddenly concentrated on a strange sight which met his eyes. Protruding above the sandy ridge of a shallow ravine hardly a hundred paces away, were the heads and shoulders of two Indians. In the immediate background stood several crudely improvised tents; a column of murky smoke rose lazily and vanished in the hot air. The predominating figure, a squaw, aged and oily, was engaged at this particular moment in the act of beating her male companion (who sat motionless with back to Gallop), over the head with a sizable club. With the third resounding crack, the Sheriff of Truceville was spurred to assume his official capacity, and he covered the intervening distance at no weak gait. Tearing his way through a barrier of mesquite and sage brush, he drew his revolver and dashed headlong into the scene of the evidently one-sided affray.



"Stop!" he cried, leveling his weapon on the squaw. "Stop in the name of the law."

The bronzed female favored him with an idle glance and simultaneously brought down the club once again on the head of the silent brave. Gallop permitted his gaze to follow the descending club. There it rested on a baffling situation.

Encasing the Indian's dome, in the shape of a derby hat, was a thick coating of dried mud; beneath the lower brim, which almost covered a pair of black eyebrows, a grinning countenance, weather beaten to a walnut crisp, peered up at Gallop in amusement. And as he stared in amazement, forgetting to press his interference, the coating of mud cracked under the squaw's incessant blows, crumbled and finally, under pressure of her fingers, revealed a mop of dirty jet hair. With the assistance of the brave, she brushed away the remaining particles of mud, and then motioning her aside, the buck calmly rose, grunted, and faced Gallop. The squaw tossed her club to the sand and bent over a pot of boiling fluid from which rose an aroma strangely familiar to Gallop. Dazed, he fumbled for his holster and eventually succeeded in replacing his revolver.

"Welcome," the brave grunted in understandable English. "Me sabe you law. No us break um. Damn good Injun. No bootleg—no tikela. Maybe a leetle Canadian Club now then—no much, no harm. Sabe?"

Grinning, Gallop nodded. "Why for?" he asked pointing to the thick mass of hair that hung almost to the brave's shoulders.

"All good desert Injun likeum look damn fine. Hair no good, come out scratchum like devil—no get good squaw. Fix 'em up fine—get young, fat squaw. Me fix 'em up—go Columbus plenty soon. Fat squaw likee good looks—me fix 'em hair for good looks. Sabe?"

His curiosity on edge, Gallop nodded again. Here was something vastly new for him. An Indian beauty parlor, deep in the New Mexico desert, presented unlimited possibilities. On the face the fact was itself incredible; but yet, here was the concrete proof—the baked crust of mud, the pot of boiling fluid, and the brave who desired plump squaws. Aroused, Gallop pressed for details.

“Is this your own idea?” he asked. “Other Indians don’t sabe?”

“All Mojave Injun know how get good hair since plenty years. No got bum looks. Plenty hair, damn fine, damn long, damn good. No fall out like Sioux. No have little much like Mohegan. Me got good bunch. Me give ’em plenty fix. Me got squaw who sabe how. Purty soon get new one who sabe better.”

At this moment the squaw grunted in a tongue foreign to Gallop, and without further enlightenment, the brave turned to where she had scooped a shallow pit in the sand.

While Gallop looked on with more amusement than interest, the female emptied the hot fluid from the pot in a pail of what was apparently water, and proceeded to shampoo the brave’s head in a manner complimentary to a Fifth Avenue tonsorial establishment. What did actually surprise him though, was the remarkable appearance of creamy bubbles of lather from the mixture, which was itself a sluggish coffee-color. He was quite positive the squaw had not included soap in the compound, and this was presently verified when she emptied the pail of bubbles and he observed the contents closely.

However, it suddenly occurred to him that he was Sheriff of Truceville and that his interest lay in that direction, and not in studying the novelties connected with the washing of an Indian’s scalp, so he called an unanswered word of departure to the beauty-desiring brave and retraced his

trail through the forest of cactus toward the blotch of gray structures that marked the city of Truceville.

The sun lay deep in the West when Gallop finally trod the deserted street and entered the gaunt portals of the blacksmith shop. He was hungry and weary from the strenuous tramp over the sands, but before preparing nourishment he uncovered a step-ladder from a heap of debris and ascended to the loft above the forge. As he presumed, the small space had previously been occupied as living quarters and he found a folding cot in fair condition and several woolen blankets, which he shook and cleansed as best he could. This finished he made up the bed for the night, dusted the few odd pieces of furniture, swept the floor and began the preparation of his meal.

This important event necessitated a fresh supply of firewood to replenish a diminishing pile, so Gallop looked about for the necessary material. In the rear of the shop a huge stack of yucca logs, trimmed of their slender bayonet-like leaves, rose almost to the sheet metal roof. They were crisp, dry and aged, he noticed, and had apparently remained untouched since the blacksmithing activities of days gone by. Here was the necessary fuel right at hand, and so deciding, he dragged the nearest to the base of the forge. It was far too bulky for the fire pit, so he buried the rusty blade of an ax in the fibrous hulk with a mighty swing. And to his astonishment, soap-like foam bubbled from the torn fibers as the ax struck. Then as he bent over in response to an urge for investigation and fingered the center of the shattered log, he discovered it to be actually damp.

Considering the fact that the yucca plant had been removed from its sandy origin years previous, this was truly surprising. He had heretofore imagined the cactus family to be void of moisture at all times, and that the pulp of this thorny desert tree could contain fluid enough to



create wet bubbles which closely resembled soap-suds, was surely in keeping with all the extraordinary events and incidents he had thus far encountered in his Truceville sojourn.

But it was not until his eyes casually shifted to the blade of the ax that the culmination to his discovery really occurred. Every trace of tarnish and rust had vanished from the slab of steel; it was as bright and shiny as though resting behind the glass of a display counter. And Gallop recalled perfectly how rusty and dull it had appeared when he took it in hand only a moment past. Were miracles in this forgotten city never to cease, he asked himself?

And then, as he meditated further on the topic, a distinctly familiar fragrance permeated the evening air and irritated his nostrils. For all of a minute he sniffed about aimlessly, unable to locate its elusive origin. Then it suddenly came to him like a clear voice from afar, and Gallop, with illuminating realization untangled the mass of conflicting thoughts that besieged his mind.

The strange aroma rose from the moist foam that saturated the pierced fibers of the hewed yucca log. It was identical with the odor which hung heavy about the pot of boiling fluid in the Indian camp. And, furthermore, Gallop traced his initial recollection of it to the tubes and glass vessels he had so thoroughly cleansed for the Mayor's experiments. The thought took his emotions by storm.

In this lather-giving product of the desert, the chemist, Granville Truce, had undoubtedly discovered remarkable merits. It had removed rust and tarnish without apparent effort before Gallop's own eyes. According to the Indian brave it had been employed by his tribe for centuries to cleanse the scalp and prevent the loss of hair. And as he thought about it, Gallop could not remember ever seeing or hearing of a bald headed Indian. The very fact that it



was a vegetable species of the cactus clan which actually contained moisture, with the miraculous power to perform duties in various distinctly opposite channels, was enough to fire his mind with vague thoughts of the infinitely vast possibilities which the production and commercialization of its qualities offered. He could almost visualize Truceville as the thriving center of a mammoth new industry, where the heretofore considered worthless vegetation of the desert was made to perform numerous cleansing feats unequaled by the chemical soap creations of man. The thought held him in a grip of fascination throughout the preparation and consuming of his dinner.

When night came to the decayed city, it found the doughty Sheriff at peace with the world. Gold to the sum of fifteen dollars reposed in his pockets; provisions for a period of two weeks filled his cupboard, a roof protected his head, and, greater still, a marvelous idea flitted about the chambers of his mind and played on the strands of his ambition.

And in all this mental functioning, two definite thoughts regarding the possible merits of the strange product were paramount: He had never previously beheld as rapid and effective a cleanser of rust, and he had never heard of a bald headed Indian. And therefore, relying on the mature bromide, "Where there is proof there is profit," he was encouraged to no little extent in the thought that profit would mean the realization and fulfillment of Granville Truce's dreams and ambitions, and bring happiness to the devoted Pauline.

## CHAPTER IX

It was late in the forenoon when the serenity of Gallop's prolonged slumber was suddenly shattered by a series of extremely loud and disturbing noises. Primarily, the thought of coyotes came to him. But as he leaped from his bed and peered down on the street from an oval window that gave light to the loft, this rash surmise was rapidly dispelled. An outrageous scene met his gaze.

Circled by a score of grinning Mexicans of the Grafter breed, who rode painted ponies at an easy trot and carried more loaded belts of ammunition than anything else, a tall, lean-faced man of uncertain age, led a frightened pack animal toward the outskirts of the town, and warded off, as best he could, the lunging assaults of a half dozen growling and snarling camp dogs. No sooner would he succeed with one brute, than another would attack his burro from the rear, necessitating a swift repetition. This continued to the tune of boisterous laughter from the Mexicans until the squadron passed almost beneath Gallop's elevated point of vision. And then the affair quite abruptly assumed official proportions for the youthful Sheriff.

Weary and exasperated, the slender victim finally lost all control of his emotions as the largest and most vicious of the dogs succeeded in dislodging the carefully balanced pack on his burro's back. From the assorted flood of supplies and provisions that poured to the street, he grasped a twelve gauge shotgun and emptied both barrels at the ferocious dog. With a mad, slobbering howl the brute flipped a somersault in midair and plunged lifeless to the sand of the street. Instantly echoing the thunderous double discharge, a third

shot rang out in the warm air. The remaining dogs fled in terror.

A scowling greaser, whom Gallop recognized by a livid scar on his cheek as a member of the throng which witnessed the destruction of his office, shot from the hip and the hot lead found its mark in the shoulder of the lean-faced man. He stumbled to his knees and fell prone, burying his features in the coarse sand. And at this particular moment the Sheriff of Truceville mobilized his forces and went into action.

Through the oval window he climbed, revolver in hand, badge on breast, and before the greasers were barely aware of his presence, he leaped and landed forcibly on the head of the Mexican who gripped the smoking pistol. The astonished bandit sprawled to the street, quite unconscious. It had meant a precarious fifteen foot drop, but the sensational effect was well worth the risk. The score of gun-packing bad men were stupefied beyond resistance. Every last one sat rigid and trance-like, eyes blinking, mouths gaping.

"Stick 'em up!" Gallop demanded, his revolver gripped in a steady aim, "and not a move or I'll let 'em all go."

Obedience on the part of the outlaws was instantaneous and in harmonious unison. They were well aware the gringo Sheriff meant what he said, and were quite consistent in allowing their fallen comrade to face his fate.

Gallop edged nearer the gradually recovering Mexican and relieved him of pistol and stiletto. His eyes did not leave the semicircle of dark faces for an instant. The dreamer, the carefree youth, had vanished from his make-up. He was through and through the grim Sheriff of Truceville, and evidently this was obvious, for the outlaws displayed little urge to fight.

"You birds have got just one minute to beat it!" he

growled, fingering the trigger of his weapon. "And the next time you pull any of this rough stuff, I'm gonna stick the lot of you behind bars. Sabe? Now beat it!"

With the regularity of a charging cavalry troupe, the bad men wheeled their ponies and stabbed the tips of silver spurs. A moment afterwards the disturbed dust of the street was the only proof of their presence. Gallop turned to the dazed Mexican, who had managed to gain his feet. At the same moment the lean-faced victim rose unsteadily to his knees and applied a neck scarf to the flow of blood from his shoulder. Gallop menaced the bandit with a motion of his revolver.

"Help him get inside," he said, nodding from the wounded man to the open doors of the blacksmith shop, "and if you care anything about living—go easy, greaser."

"Thanks, friend," the injured man said to Gallop, as the Mexican assisted him to his feet, "I reckon Truceville has done got itself a real Sheriff at last—I'm plumb glad."

When Gallop had followed the pair to the mattress of straw which he prepared on the first night of his occupation, and the wounded man was propped in a comfortable position, he allowed his gaze for the first time to traverse the length of the shop. To his surprise, Granville Truce was bent in undisturbed labor over the long work bench where was the improvised laboratory. His interest was apparently concentrated on the tubes and commodities before him, for he was undeniably deaf to the sound and blind to the sight of everything else about him.

Gallop suppressed his curiosity and turned to the bandit. The latter eyed him with a menacing glare.

"Build a fire in the forge, Mex," he ordered, "and make it quick!" Then he stepped back and faced the bleeding victim.

"Hurt bad?" he asked.



"Just a scratch, pardner," came the reply. "Reckon they'd have done for me though, if you hadn't stepped in. I sure do appreciate it. Out here, you don't meet many folks, and the most of 'em are like these dirty greasers. My name's Jones," he added. "Decent folks call me Buffalo, Buffalo Jones—the hermit, which I reckon is about the truth. I aim to play her alone—but this here time my single religion kinda failed me. From now on, you're my friend, Sheriff."

"I'll be pleased to be," Gallop declared. "I've heard Miss Truce mention you as one of her customers. My name's Thompson, Darcey Thompson. No relation to the former official—just a coincidence. But now," he added, handing the Mexican's pistol to the hermit and returning his own to its holster, "if you'll cover the greaser, I'll clean up that wound."

This procedure occupied the better share of half an hour, during which period the captive supplied frequent basins of warm water, and obediently complied with each of Gallop's many instructions. Granville Truce remained with his devices at the bench, and only once did he favor the trio with a glance. And then it was vague and unconcerned.

Gallop found the wound slight and only flesh deep. The bullet had missed the bone by an inch. He halted the flow of blood with a tourniquet and bandaged the shoulder as best he could. Then he faced the scowling bandit again.

"I should arrest you," he declared, with forced gruffness, "but for various reasons I'm gonna be lenient and let you go. In exchange for your dagger and gun, which you won't need, I'm giving you the dead dog. You lug that mess beyond the city limits, greaser, or you'll both occupy the same grave. Now, clear out!"

Gallop stood under the arch of the doors until the cursing Mexican, with the carcass hanging over his back, had disappeared in the fringe of cactus at the end of the street.

Then he approached the stray burro, which had been interested elsewhere since the departure of the annoying dogs, and coaxed it without argument to a stall in the shack adjoining the shop. With this accomplished he collected the array of scattered provisions and piled them close to the mattress of straw and the amiable hermit.

Buffalo Jones had been resting easily; now he propped himself up again and beamed a smile of gratification on his benefactor.

"I reckon I'll owe you plenty in the way of thanks, Sheriff," he said. "You rescued me in the nick of time, then you doctored me up like a regular medico, an' now you're kinda taking the place of a combination nurse an' valet. If old Granville, back there," he indicated the work bench "had run across you a few years ago, Truceville wouldn't a been the dead hole she is now. I'm not the forgettin' sort, Thompson. Sometime I'll turn a trick for you, and I'll be dog-gone glad when I can. You're genuine goods, Sheriff—I like you."

"Thanks," Gallop replied, "it was a darn stiff proposition, I'll admit." (He had read so often of the modest fiction hero, he determined in his personal case to reverse the formula.) "But then I've found in my brief career a Sheriff's office has no limitations—especially here in Truceville. The fewer citizens—the more need for an officer, it seems. Now," he added, "if you'll excuse me for a while, Jones, I'll pay our Mayor a little visit. Evidently, he's quite unaware of our presence."

"Sure, Thompson," the hermit answered, "don't bother 'bout me. You've already done a heap mor'n I deserve. I'll just rest a bit. And if you get a chance, tell the old feller I said, 'Hello.' He was some man in his day. Always admired him—always will. Crazy or not, don't make no difference to me. The damn greasers are to blame for his

condition—that dirty thief Grafter, an' his gang. Wonder somebody ain't shot the skunk afore this. He's sure got it comin', if ever a body had."

"Yes, from what I've heard he's a bad egg," Gallop replied. "I imagine it would be doing this community a favor to scratch his name from the roll-call. If he doesn't get me in the meantime, the pleasure might possibly be mine. However, until he performs, there's nothing I can do."

So saying, Gallop proceeded to the rear of the shop and paused before the work bench, which was littered in confusing array with the instruments and vessels he had so neatly arranged. The aged chemist stirred a mixture of powder-like ingredients in a glass bowl, and turned occasionally to hold the compound to the light. Presently he weighed a portion of something or other on the accurate scale, tested it in a measure vase, and added it to the already prepared formula. Then he smiled and nodded to Gallop.

"Everything excellent," he declared, "coming along fine. Should have the first solution done by night—that is, if she don't show raw. But now that you're here," he suggested as an afterthought, "we might as well check over this list of stuff. Chemical supply houses make errors same as anybody, you know."

"It wouldn't be a bad scheme," Gallop answered, without hesitation. "You name the articles, Granville, and I'll check 'em off." He fumbled in his pockets and finally encountered the deed to the cemetery.

"One iron mortar and beater," the Mayor announced, paying no attention to Gallop whatever. "Five test tubes. Three glass vessels. One hydrometer for liquid gravity testing. One graduate vase. One drug scale. One glass still. Six two-pound packages of number eleven, granulated. Four eight-pound packages of number seven, triple strength. Two half-pound sacks of coarse, number nine C.,



and five bottles of assorted perfume extracts. I guess that's about all, Tommy. It don't look the price it costs, does it, eh?"

"No. But then it's money well spent, and I'm glad everything came. And now," Gallop stalled for further information, "how about the other stuff?"

"What stuff?" the Mayor inquired, in a puzzled voice.

"Why—that, that—those," Gallop stuttered, undetermined as to the accurateness of his analysis regarding the desert foliage.

"Oh, you mean the yucca logs, eh? Well I think we've got enough on hand here to last for this first batch. And if we do run out, those Injuns'll haul us another load. If this thing is the success it should be, we'll use tractors later on and work out a regular system. Lord knows there's enough of it around here. Hauling it in will be our only worry. And now," he added, "will you bring me the deadeast log in the bunch, Sheriff? You know my deduction proved the older the plant, the stronger the fluid."

"Sure," Gallop willingly complied. And in an instant he was selecting the requested commodity. When he accomplished the task and removed a bulky log from the pile, he risked a suggestion.

"Shall I chop it in two?" he inquired.

"Yes, if you will, Sheriff," agreed the Mayor, in the act of mixing a fresh chemical solution, "and then pound up the pulp in the mortar, as we saw the Injuns do. Better beat it down fine—no chance for a failure on the juice then. You see, Sheriff, each little fiber has millions of separate cells and to extract the fluid we must pierce those cells. Otherwise, we miss the valuable element."

It was a matter of half an hour at strenuous labor before Gallop succeeded in reducing the tough hulk to the required pulp. When he eventually concluded the necessary task, the



iron bowl of the mortar was brimming with a brown soapy liquid. He placed it on the bench close to the Mayor's instruments.

"Is that fine enough, Granville?" he asked.

"Great!" the chemist exclaimed, "and now for the real test. We're right—or we're wrong. Here goes!" Dipping a vase partly full of the juice, he inserted a portion in the hydrometer and added a delicate measure of the formula he had prepared. This he balanced and carefully set aside. Then from a sack of granulated drugs, he weighed out a tiny amount in a glass bowl, and injected a tube full of highly perfumed fluid.

"Preservative—to keep it from spoiling," he advised, "and perfume to give it a pleasant odor. Both harmless to the product's quality. And now we mix them with the juice itself. If one dissolves in the other we've succeeded, partner." He emptied the contents of the hydrometer into the bowl. With a glass beater he stirred them together: then raised the mixture to the light.

"We've won, Thompson," he said in a grave voice, "we've perfected one of the greatest natural products of the century. The desert yucca has at last come into its own. Possibly it will not actually grow hair as the Mojave Indians believe. But I can prove it will cleanse the scalp as no chemical soap or shampoo ever can; that it will rid the hair of dandruff and diseases; and furthermore that it will give an abundance of natural lather which has heretofore been impossible without the aid of chemicals, which, as you know, harm the scalp. Sheriff, it's all foolishness to dig for gold out here on the desert, or drill for oil. Why, right on the sandy surface there are a thousand fortunes. Think of the miles of yucca and cactus a few dollars will lease—and at the same time don't forget there are many other products besides hair tonic and soapless shampoo that can be made

from the supposedly worthless cactus family. For instance: Hemp rope, varnish, grease remover, metal cleanser, and all those by-products we've meddled with. Why, Thompson, we can build Truceville to one of the largest commercial centers on the border by our little discoveries. And you know that's always been my ambition, and it always will be."

"It's wonderful to think you've accomplished all this, Granville." Gallop was somehow unable to include himself in the credit award. "And now that it's perfected, I don't see what can hold us back, do you?"

"Money—that's all, Sheriff," came the answer. "You know I've invested practically every penny I have in Truceville, and to really produce our products as they should be produced, will take thousands of dollars. We must convert this shop into a factory and complete laboratory; install specially designed machines; employ expert mechanics and chemists; induce the Santa Fe to build us a branch railroad; establish a bottling works and systematize our output; advertise nationally and have scores of salesmen covering the country. Yes, old man, there's much to be done if we are to succeed. It's one thing to discover a really valuable product—and another to sell it."

"Perhaps we can incorporate and sell stock," Gallop eagerly suggested, overwhelmed by the limitless possibilities in the vast plan of production the elderly Mayor outlined. "With such development there is sure to be a great financial profit. It seems to me a bank would back us—that is, if they weren't too conservative."

"I think to incorporate and sell, or form a private company with our citizens as stockholders, is the best plan," advised the chemist; "of course a private company is much more desirable than a free-for-all outfit. But I doubt if we can raise the necessary cash in Truceville. We'll need at

least ten or twelve thousand dollars to begin with. If there was just some friend we knew who had it to invest, everything would work out fine. Then Truceville would boom and grow to a model commercial center, and prosperity would flourish—just like I always dreamed and planned, and prayed.”

“If you’ll accommodate me, friends,” a familiar voice startled both Gallop and the Mayor, “I’ll take a flyer on your darned idea. Here’s my word and hand for ten thousand Yankee dollars. They’re in the bank at Columbus, too.”

Buffalo Jones, angular, lean-faced and gaunt, stepped up to the bench and offered his hand. “Got lonesome back there,” he apologized, indicating the mattress at the front of the shop; “hope there ain’t no harm done by me overhearin’ this a-way.”

## CHAPTER X

In the week that succeeded the formation of a certain Nature's Products Company (for the profitable purpose of producing salable commodities from desert plants—chiefly Yucca Tonic and Shampoo), numerous transformations occurred in and about the forgotten city of Truceville, and to its sparse population. To the relief of all concerned, Granville Truce was more his former self than at any time since the pitiful inception of his affliction. There were, to be sure, brief occasions when he lapsed to a vague, listless mood and apparently lost all interest in the progress of his experiments. But, collectively, his time was earnestly spent in serious discussion or devoted to new study and chemical analysis, and both Buffalo Jones, who remained to assist in the development of the enterprise, and Gallop, who entered into the enterprise with the eagerness of his years, were exceedingly satisfied.

Under a barrage of more or less curious questions, the hermit confessed heretofore unsuspected incidents in his supposedly calm and uneventful life. Reared on the desert, he had loved it since youth. Not with that momentary fascination which comes to the adventurer or fortune hunter, but with a passionate devotion, an honest respect for every grain of its heated sand, each blade of its thorny cactus, every inch of its glorious vastness. Its broad level mesas, its low rolling dunes, its mighty mountains were a vital part of his very existence. He was, it might be said, of the desert, for the desert, and by the desert.

When but a mere youngster he had followed in his father's footsteps and traversed the mountains and plains in quest of gold. Prospecting had failed him until he finally



struck a rich vein in the Rockies in 1900. For two solid years he had worked it, banked his profit, and then again the desert had beckoned. To a quiet ravine at the base of the Cabasas he had come, perfectly contented to spend the remainder of his life in the solitude of the magnificence which circled him. The rise and fall of Truceville he had watched with the idle interest of one unconcerned. The founder had become his friend; the girl, Pauline, an acquaintance. And now he had invested his savings in the products of the yucca plant, not because it offered an opportunity to further his riches, but for the fulfillment of two distinct desires: Primarily it afforded ample repayment to the Sheriff of Truceville for his timely aid; but above everything it meant the development of a genuine desert product. And that was the deciding point. Where the interest of the desert lay at stake, Buffalo Jones was, by birth and instinct, vitally concerned.

And thus it occurred on the seventh existing day of the Nature's Products Company that the hermit gold miner fixed his scrawling signature to a Columbus notary's contract which legally bound him in a mutually agreed proposition to the party of the first part, Granville Truce, and to the party of the second part, Darcey Thompson.

Following this important action, which took place in a law office not far from the bullet riddled Columbus drug store, the officials of the Nature's Products Company (incorporation papers already filed) proceeded to the Western Union office, where a period of time was consumed in sending telegrams to various manufacturers of special machines, necessary devices, and intricate instruments. The elderly chemist had previously prepared lengthy letters and descriptive orders, which, under the supervision of Gallop, were typed and mailed to already selected supply firms. This was followed by half an hour at the one and only

hardware store, where metal tubs, sharp bolo knives, and numerous necessary trifles were purchased.

It was rapidly verging on dusk when they climbed into the dilapidated recesses of a single horse rig, which was the property of the Mayor, for the return trip to Truceville. His work of the day concluded, Granville Truce drifted away in a lethargic mood. Buffalo Jones lazily clamped his feet to the brace rod and puffed in silence on the stem of an odorous corn-cob pipe. Gallop took the reins in a firm grip and with the crack of a whip, the Nature's Products Company rode off in a golden sunset toward the scene of their future activities.

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A pale moon lay high in a star-clustered sky when the Sheriff of Truceville drew the noisy rig to a halt before the Mayor's residence in the forgotten city. Bidding his partners good night (Buffalo had previously accepted the hospitality of the Truce home where his healing wound could receive more care and attention, while Gallop, for reasons best known to himself, persistently offered imaginary excuses), our hero departed for his quarters at the end of the vacant street.

Since leaving Columbus he had meditated quite seriously on his future and the great opportunity his share in the enterprise involved. Here he was, within ten days of his abrupt appearance as an ostracized person on the Truceville thoroughfare, the Sheriff of the community, the vice-president and production manager of a hundred thousand dollar corporation, and completely in love with a girl whose friendship he had spurned simply for the trivial sake of an abused vanity. This latter had been one glorious moment of triumph while it lasted, but now that he thought of her more and saw her less, he recognized his rash blunder, but as yet he had found no plausible excuse

by which a reconciliation could be effected. In their infrequent encounters of late, Pauline had calmly passed him with utter disregard, as though he were invisible, and unable to dissolve the false proportions of his pride, Gallop had maintained a similar attitude. It was, to say the least, both embarrassing and annoying, yet neither would bend in condescension.

As he neared the blacksmith shop, Gallop forced his thoughts from Pauline and reviewed the events which marked the swift advancement instigated by his revival of Granville Truce's former plans. Already a dozen Indian braves had contracted to furnish a daily supply of yucca logs, while their squaws were to deliver fifty pieces of baked and painted pottery each week. As a unique and original manner of presentation, Gallop had conceived the idea to use Indian pottery as containers for their product instead of bottles, and both Buffalo and the Mayor had readily commended the plan. It typically suggested the primeval origin of the yucca juice, and was quite as cheap as the more ordinary bottles. From occasional phrases dropped by the Mayor, Gallop learned the Mojave Indians had used the solution on their hair in a crude form for centuries. What had baffled him on his encounter with the squaw-desiring brave was now obvious. The Indians boiled the yucca pulp to a thick fluid, applied it to their scalps, then as a precaution to prevent the entry of evil spirits which they believed would surely ruin the completed effect, they sealed their domes in a cast of mud which was allowed to dry and remain intact for several days. These facts Gallop verified by a visit to the near-by camp, where he conversed on the subject while arranging for the yucca and pottery supply. The chemical end he left almost entirely to the Mayor—what interested him most was the actual production and the merchandising possibilities. He recalled the words



of Granville Truce: "It's one thing to discover a valuable product—and another to sell it," and therefore chose the difficult performance as his own.

As Gallop slid open the portals of the shop and applied the flame of a match to a candle that stood on the rim of the forge, a delightful vision of a mammoth factory of vast capacity, a thriving commercial city and an internationally successful product played on his youthful imagination—and then the disheartening sight the flare of the candle revealed, shattered the illusion in an instant:—

From the improvised laboratory to the ladder which rose to the loft, every serviceable object had been violently crushed, torn or wrecked beyond repair. The delicate devices and glass vases were reduced to a crumbled mess on the dirt of the floor; the recently arrived contingent of pottery had been smashed and scattered in all directions; the few pieces of furniture were broken and trampled to scrap wood; even the work bench had been splintered by the blows of an ax, and the ax itself, nicked and dulled by forceful contact with a stone boulder, had been left behind.

The smile that had faintly curved the lips of the Sheriff of Truceville quickly vanished, as his astonished gaze settled on the scene of hopeless destruction. The fingers of his right hand beat a nervous tattoo on the leather flap of his holster. The color gradually faded from his cheeks; his teeth ground in an audible gnawing. And then once again the son of Charles Christopher Meredyth went into action.

Twenty minutes later he inconspicuously entered Graftor Torso's Casino and Saloon, and proceeded unrecognized to a spot near the center of a crowded bar. The dive was packed to the doors with an assorted throng of greasy Mexicans and pale faced denizens of the bad-man breed. A bevy of repulsive females flitted singly from one table to the next or danced with prospective customers on a small



sawdust floor, to the tune of a jingling piano. Thick clouds of tobacco smoke hung foul in the stuffy atmosphere and the odor of rotgut, combined with the stench of perspiration, prevailed to a nauseating degree. Bent over a spinning roulette wheel, was the oily proprietor—his jacket removed, his vest unbuttoned, a fat cheroot protruding from his mouth.

Turning sideways to command a wider view, Gallop drew his revolver, aimed at the plank floor, and pulled the trigger. Following the echo of the thunderous report a dead silence gripped the hall. Those nearest the smoking revolver edged warily away. Grafter reached for his pistol, but that was as far as he got.

"Careful!" Gallop warned, "I'm aiming right at your belly, Grafter, and my fingers might slip." Then without changing either position or gaze, he continued in a loud, deliberate voice to the crowd in general. "You're now looking at the Sheriff of Truceville," came his words, "and whoever's figuring on reaching for a gun had better take a good look, 'cause this'll be the last time they see me—or anybody! Sabe? I'm here to lay down the law, lay it down to a herd of dirty greasers who should have been buried years ago. And particularly I'm here to advise you, Grafter Torso, that you've got just twenty-four hours to pack your grip and fly! I'm backed by state troops if I need 'em, and this dump'll close its doors in ten minutes or the regulars will start from Columbus. Sabe? Truceville has begun its comeback, and that means it's time for you birds to show up missing. Now stand back, you saps; I'm gonna stick my gun away and walk out of here without being molested. If anybody so much as tries to stop me, Uncle Sam's cavalry will be here before dawn. And if I'm not back in Truceville presently—that'll mean you birds have got me, which is the same as if I sent word to Columbus myself. Now get out of my way!"

Thrusting his revolver in its holster, Gallop strode toward the entrance. The crowd parted and fell back before his advance. When he reached the front of the hall, so far unhindered, he turned his back abruptly on the silent throng—and then a square-necked gin bottle spun through the air and struck his head with a resounding crash.

His knees sagged; he staggered and then plunged headlong to the sawdust of the floor, where he lay motionless in a quickly forming pool of crimson. It had been Gallop's one slender opportunity to retreat uninjured and victorious, and the risk had been in vain.

## CHAPTER XI

When the Sheriff of Truceville finally regained consciousness and was able to lift the sagging lids from his eyes and blink them to focus a blurred vision, he found himself bound and gagged, and lying flat on his back in a dingy four-walled adobe. The room was dimly illuminated by a candle which flickered a halo of yellow from the ledge of a fire pit. Squatted in Indian fashion near a barred door was the Mexican with the livid scar on his cheek. Across his arms rested a rifle of high caliber; a snarl curled his lips and revealed an irregular row of cinnamon tinted teeth. He eyed the slow recovery of the victim intently.

Gallop was unable to function his mental perception accurately. His head throbbed incessantly under the pain of a nasty gash from which blood trickled and clotted his hair. He faintly recalled his defeat and cursed himself for the blunder in attempting to bluff the lawless renegades—it had been a fool's paradise while it lasted. Now he paid for it with blood, if not his life.

The greaser rose to his feet and pounded the butt of his rifle against the thick door. Presently the barrier swung on leather hinges and displayed the six-foot frame of the bandit leader poised in the arch. Grafter laughed in a harsh tone and stepped into the halo of candle light.

"Sheriff," he mocked, folding his arms across his chest and riveting a twinkling gaze on Gallop, "Sheriff—that's funny, that's funny. So I'm to beat it in twenty-four hours, am I—close the casino in ten minutes. Well I guess by now you sabe who's won—and in less than an hour you're gonna feel who's won. Feel it so damn hard you'll never be able to forget. I've played with you too long as it is.

Now I'm gonna ooze in a little medicine, sabe? I've looked you up, gringo. You're no Sheriff—and you never were or ever will be. If you see daylight again you'll be damn lucky—and it won't be my fault. Now get on your feet, pronto!"

Until the facially disfigured greaser assisted him, Gallop remained motionless on the floor. Then he gripped the Mexican's arm, stumbled to his knees and finally succeeded in staggering to a pair of wobbly legs.

"Take him out to the stall, Lopez," Grafter commanded his helper. "We'll meet you mucho pronto." Replying with a nod Lopez fastened a vise-like grip about Gallop's arm and presently the Sheriff of Truceville found himself being propelled at a determined pace through the moonlit darkness of the night.

Hardly an hour afterwards the decaying houses that edged the slumbering thoroughfare of the forgotten city, looked out upon a strange sight. Between two trotting lines of boisterous, mocking horsemen, a lone figure, stripped of shoes and stockings, stumbled along in the dust at the jerking end of a rope lariat which was drawn taut from the horn of a bronco saddle.

Blindfolded, gagged and bound securely by horsehair handcuffs, Gallop found progress almost beyond the limits of endurance. The pain from his wound had increased tremendously; the rope that dragged him on and on, cut deep into the flesh of his arms and burned raw the skin from his chest. His feet bled from the jagged stab of stone boulders and painful thrusts of thorny cactus. Once he tripped over the log of a yucca and fell among the bayonet-like blades. Without a pause, the rope brutally jerked him to his feet and dragged him on at a more rapid gait.

Finally, after a strenuous mile of merciless repetition, a dense mantle of dullness flooded Gallop's mind, and with it



came welcome numbness to his bleeding limbs and torn feet. The laughing, snarling horsemen appeared distorted to his blurred vision; the cactus, the vegetation, the sandy dunes, lost their natural contour—and then unconsciousness relieved his misery, and the bruised and battered body of the Sheriff of Truceville sunk listlessly to the sand in a blood saturated heap.

“Cut the rope an’ leave him, Lopez,” Grafter advised. “We’ll be returning, sabe?” The mounted squadron wheeled their ponies and galloped off toward a horizon of amethyst as the pearl tint of dawn painted the Eastern sky with vivid rays.

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Realization that he was yet alive came to Gallop quite suddenly, and also quite unexpectedly, and left him as suddenly. Surely that had been the horrible end out there on the desert. But, no—for, far in the distance, the babbling trickle of clear water was plainly audible, or at least he imagined it was. Yes, that was it—his imagination. He was dead, a corpse, undoubtedly cold and gaunt, but yet that imagination of his, that dreamer’s viewpoint, lived on and on. No, he was wrong, it wasn’t an illusion after all—it was actually water. He felt it now—on his forehead, cool, delightful, invigorating. Someone was bending over him, that was it, bathing his wounds, nursing the life back into his weary, dead body. The figure was flittingly vague at times, like a dim mirage—then it exaggerated beyond natural proportions to some grotesque form of hideousness. Why didn’t he speak to it? He was a Sheriff, wasn’t he? Where was his badge, his gun? He’d show that freakish monster it couldn’t drown him! He’d shoot it and smash all those little Indian bowls, you bet he would! He was Sheriff of Truceville—funny, was it? Well, yes, it was funny—the monster with the cactus thorns growing from its head was

right. But they couldn't drown him this way. He'd lick 'em—he'd swim back!

The phantom curtain lifted from Gallop's eyes and his mind cleared away the tangled mass of preposterous apparitions which mingled together in wild unison. The girl, Pauline, was in the act of bathing his brow with a wet towel. He was lying prone on the straw mattress in the blacksmith shop. Outside through the partly open portals, it was daylight. Early, though, he presumed, for there was not a trace of the inevitable sun. Had it all been a frightful nightmare, he dazedly wondered; a fantastic illusion? No, it had actually occurred, for there were the shattered tubes and instruments, the broken pottery, and all that. But why, why was she here? Didn't she hate him? Ignore him? Surely it must be a distorted dream.

"If you just lie still a moment longer," she said, "I'll finish the last bandage." And then: "Are you comfortable, Mr. Thompson?"

"Why, why, yes, Pauline," Gallop heard himself stutter, "but I don't understand. How did I—?"

"They left you unconscious out on the desert, Mr. Thompson, near the Indian camp," Pauline interrupted. "The brutes, the murderers! I think they thought you were dead. Anyway, they didn't expect you to live—of that, I'm certain."

"But where is your father—and, and Buffalo Jones?" Gallop found the incidents of the night returning to him swiftly. The baffling details of his rescue presented the real problem.

"I haven't risked leaving you to wake them yet," came her reply. "When you're feeling better, I'll run over to the house and tell them what's happened. They don't know about this," a nod indicated the demolished laboratory, "or about your fight. I didn't tell them last night, Mr. Thomp-

son. I—I wanted to see what you'd do alone—without their aid. I'm sorry now, though. I should have told them when they returned from Columbus. Possibly I could have saved you all these injuries."

"Then you, alone, rescued me?" This came as an incredulous question.

"From my window, I waited to,—well to see just what you'd do when you found the shop mutilated. I had seen Gafter and his outlaws do it an hour before. So when you left in the direction of the Casino, I saw you go. After a while I dozed off and fell asleep. The sound of hoofbeats woke me. In the moonlight I saw them, Gafter and his horrible gang, dragging you barefooted toward the desert. A fear seized me. I was already dressed—so I quietly slipped out of the house to the stall and saddled up father's horse. The greasers made a lot of noise and it wasn't difficult to follow them. When they finally stopped, I hid in the brush till they were gone; then I found you, and brought you here. It was a mean trick on my part, not to have told father and Buffalo the minute they came home. It's foolish I realize, Mr. Thompson, for me to say I'm sorry—but nevertheless, I am, I surely am."

A pause of silence, then: "You've nothing, Pauline, nothing in the world to be sorry for," Gallop declared. "Regardless whether your father knew or not, I'd have gone to the Casino—nothing could have stopped me. I'm bull-headed, I guess. And, Pauline, I—I don't know what to say or what to do, to show you how much I really appreciate what you've done for me. Why, I'd be lying out there yet if you hadn't come—probably dead by now, Pauline." And then: "Are my injuries serious?" he asked, "or is it just my darn old imagination?"

"I'm positive there are no broken bones," Pauline answered. "But your head is cut badly, Mr. Thompson, and



your ankles and feet are in terrible condition. I've removed all the cactus thorns and bandaged them as best I could. If you're comfortable now, I'll wake Buffalo and father. One of them can drive to Columbus for a doctor."

"I'd much rather have your company than a doctor's." Gallop smiled with effort. "But I will admit at this moment I'm not by far the most able-bodied person in the world. However, there's no need waking them so early, Pauline. Talk to me a while longer, if you will? It seems to sort of ease the pain."

In the distance the jingling clatter of steel and thumping of many hoofbeats suddenly filled the air, and as Pauline and Gallop held tense, rigid poses, the racket swelled in volume until the unmistakable din, as of many persons dismounting, sounded close at hand. Presently, a familiar voice rose above the noise:

"I tell you I'm not mixed up in this mess, Captain." It was obviously Graftor Torso who spoke. "I've been running my place accordin' to law. Not a drop of liquor did you find anywhere about me. But, as I've told you, this fellow who hangs out here is the guilty bird. I've suspected he was smuggling for a couple of weeks. Some of the boys showed up drunk and told me they bought it here. Bet you'll find a supply now. But not him, Captain, nope—not that clever bird. I saw him ride toward Mexico early last night. Somebody must have tipped him off you were gonna pull a raid, eh?"

In the blacksmith shop at this moment, stepped a grim, gray haired individual, garbed in the uniform of a United States Cavalry Captain. At his heels tagged Graftor, and then behind the swaggering bandit, a squad of khaki clad troopers. Literally paralyzed by the rash fabrication they had overheard, neither Pauline nor Gallop were capable of fully comprehending the situation.



Surprised at the discovery, the Captain fixed them with an official glare. "What does this mean?" he demanded, and then before they could reply, added: "You're both under arrest until this investigation is concluded."

"I'm a lawful citizen of Truceville, Captain," Gallop declared, recovering from the blow of Grafter's startling accusation. "And I'm only alive because that lying outlaw, Grafter Torso, made a mistake when he thought his bandits had killed me! Look at him now, Captain! See the proof written all over his face. He lied to you—and he tried to get me out of the way so he could lay the blame for his deeds at my feet. I know him and his dirty gang only too well!"

"That's him, Captain!" the bandit cried, swiftly secreting his astonishment at finding the annoying Sheriff alive. "He's the bird you want—the guilty smuggler! I guess I don't have to tell you he's lying about me. I expected he'd try to frame me, all along. Better pull a gat on him—he's dangerous."

"Never mind what I'd better do," the Captain advised. "I'm running this affair. Both of you answer my questions—and in the meantime, shut up!" He turned and eyed Pauline. "Who are you?" he asked, "and what have you been doing here?"

"I'm the daughter of Granville Truce, founder of this town," she answered. "I saw Grafter and his gang torturing Mr. Thompson last night, and since then I've been nursing him back to life."

"That'll be all for now, miss." The Captain momentarily dismissed her and faced Gallop. "So you're a liquor smuggler, are you?" he questioned.

"I most certainly am not!" declared Gallop. "All the liquor that's drunk in this town is sold over the bar in Grafter's Casino. And if anybody's smuggling it in, it's him or his crew."

"You lie!" shouted the bandit, with a brilliant attempt at indignation. "The Captain has already searched my Casino and found not a drop. Everybody knows you're guilty. Why try to frame me?"

"Shut up!" the captain interrupted. "Not another word out of either of you." Then he turned to a non-commissioned officer who stood nearby. "Search the place, Sergeant," he commanded. "Every last inch!"

This duty speedily progressed in orderly fashion until the Sergeant mounted the ladder that rose to the loft. After a brief inspection he descended and saluted his superior officer.

"Sir," he reported, "there are five sealed cases in the loft. Each is marked as containing bonded whiskey."

Waving a reply, the Captain turned to Gallop. "Do you live here?" he inquired in a harsh voice.

"Yes, sir," Gallop promptly answered, "but I did *not* put that liquor up there. And also I didn't have the slightest idea it was there. I realize it looks bad for me, Captain, and although I'm absolutely innocent, I wilfully submit to arrest."

"Like hell you do!" A new voice, coming from the open doors of the shop, vibrated the air with the force and determination of its tone. "That is—not without an argument!"

## CHAPTER XII

It impressed Gallop, as he quickly turned and stared at the recent arrival, that Buffalo Jones was making a specialty of these dramatic appearances—and so far, he recalled, they had proved most welcome. The Cavalry Captain was the first to speak. His indignation blended to admiration, as he looked twice and recognized the lanky figure in the doorway.

"Well I'll be hanged!" he exploded, "if it isn't old Buffalo Jones himself; son of the greatest trooper that ever lived. Step right in and join us, you mangy old reprobate. But here," he added, in the next breath, "I'm losing myself. What's all this about an argument?"

The lean-faced hermit advanced to the forge and planted himself on the brick rim. Lazily he drew forth his inevitable corn-cob pipe, and after slowly filling the mahogany-stained bowl, applied a match. Then he grinned and eyed the Captain.

"Ain't seen you for a dog's age, O'Donnel," he calmly declared; "not since the days when dad and you rode with the 'Seventh' and ran old Geronimo out of Arizona. Those were the real days, eh? How are you, anyway?"

"Never felt better in my life, Buffalo," the officer answered, "but a minute ago you said this booze smuggler here," he indicated Gallop, "wasn't going to submit to arrest without an argument. I don't understand. Do you know him?"

"Slightly—I work for him, O'Donnel," Buffalo yawned. "He's vice-president of the Nature's Product Company—I'm only the treasurer. Hope to get promoted if I work hard, though."

"For your sake, I'm sorry, Buffalo," said the Captain, "but we've got the goods on him. Smuggled whiskey in from Mexico. Found five cases of it hid up above in the loft. Hate like the devil to hear he's your friend, old man."

A period of tense silence, then: "Care if I ask a question, or two, Cap?" placidly inquired the hermit, puffing billows of odorous smoke in the sultry air. "Seein' as he's in a tight jam—an' also seein' as Miss Truce, there, is my pardner's daughter—I oughter have a word or two. What say?"

"Ask what you like, Buffalo," came the answer, "but I'm afraid it's no use. It looks pretty bad for him—finding the stuff right where he lives. But then, as I said, you've my permission to say what you please."

"Who told you Mr. Thompson was smuggling?" The question was directed at the Captain himself.

"Why, Grafter tipped us off. You see, Buffalo, we knew the stuff was coming across the line pretty frequently down this way, and we guessed it was Grafter. So we staged a raid on his Casino an hour ago—and didn't find a drop, anywhere. I grilled him, and he finally confessed that his crowd were buying it up here in the blacksmith shop from a stranger. The evidence is up in the loft right this minute. Thompson would have admitted his guilt if you hadn't stopped him, Buffalo."

"Thanks, Cap," the hermit declared, "that's point number one in favor of the defense. Grafter tells you who's doin' the smuggling. Why? Because he, an' nobody else, is guilty. Now for point number two." Impassionate, free of agitation, Buffalo shifted his eyes to the bandit, who had apparently lost a bit of his confidence and blustering self-reliance.

"I've heard every word since you and O'Donnel arrived," he informed, "so there's no use lying to me, Grafter. And now I want to know why you destroyed the plain proof of



honest labor in this shop; why you tried to kill Thompson in cold blood, and why you planted your smuggled liquor up in the loft, if you aren't guilty? You don't need to answer—I'll do it for you, an' I'll tell God's truth."

For a moment a cynical smile played on the hermit's gaunt features. Then the smile changed to an expression of loathing and he continued, his voice a menacing growl:

"You knew Thompson was eventually gonna run you out of Truceville, Grafter. You sabe'd it purty pronto. So you figured, when some rat tipped you off about O'Donnel's raid, that you'd hide your own supply under your enemy's roof, then bump him off, so as he'd not get it, or be able to defend himself. You hoped O'Donnel's troopers wouldn't find it—but if you did have to lay blame on Thompson to save your own hide, you had a great alibi. Booze found—stranger gone; O'Donnel's got your liquor—but you've got rid of an enemy. It was damn clever, Mex, but you're due for a slip-up right pronto. That's point number two, Cap. Now for the next."

Buffalo calmly refilled his pipe before continuing. When it was lit, he turned to the officer again. "O'Donnel," he said, "according to Miss Truce, daughter of the founder and Mayor of this city, she saw Grafter's gang demolish this shop yesterday afternoon, when her father, Thompson and me, wuz in Columbus. Also she says she saw Grafter an' his outlaws try to murder Thompson last night. One look at the shop proves it's been smashed, an' one look at Thompson proves he's about half dead now. So I reckon she's tellin' the truth. Puttin' everything together kinda makes it look bad for Grafter. Don't it, Cap?"

"Well, I don't know as it does, Buffalo," replied the officer, "your yarn sounds probable enough. But there's no real concrete evidence. That is, other than what's in the loft. No, old man, we've got to have proof." He nodded to the

non-commissioned officer. "Sergeant," he ordered, "place this man Thompson under arrest—charged with smuggling—and hold Miss Truce for further investigation. Sorry old man," this was meant for Buffalo, "but your dad would have taken the same action. Duty goes a long way with us of the 'Seventh,' you know."

"Just a minute, though, O'Donnel," interrupted the hermit, rising and knocking the ashes from his pipe, "just a minute, now, I ain't half done yet. Why, Cap, I ain't even showed you the proof an' evidence yet. An' you don't wanta go without that, do you?"

"What do you mean—proof and evidence?"

"I mean I got the genuine goods on that dirty rattler, Grafter. Have your men bring down the cases o' booze from upstairs, O'Donnel, as a personal favor, have 'em bring 'em down now."

Without a moment of hesitation, the officer spoke to his subordinate. "Order the squad to remove that liquor, Sergeant," he commanded. "Have them pile it here." "Here" was defined by a gesture indicating the dirt floor of the shop.

Acting in concert, the four troopers handled the crates rapidly. Presently the complete supply rose in an orderly stack before the forge. The Captain fixed his eyes on the hermit. Gallop and Pauline stood in silence throughout the entire controversy. Now, they too, riveted their respective gazes on the lean face.

"Well, Buffalo, your favor is granted," the officer declared. "Now what?"

"Open 'em," came the answer, "every dog-gone one!"

The Captain shrugged his shoulders, and gave the order. Presently the blade of an ax split wide the lid of a crate marked "Haig and Haig." And to the amazement of all, save the hermit, who swiftly drew his pistol and leveled it at

Grafter, there was disclosed a score of small Indian pottery jars fitted snugly in straw containers that had evidently once held quart bottles of valuable Scotch. With a glance Gallop recognized them as the initial effort of the Nature's Products Co. They had been filled with fluid and stored in the Mayor's cellar the day previous for a preservative experiment. How they reached the interior of the crate presented a relieving and quite humorous mystery.

"Them jars is full of hair tonic, O'Donnel," advised Buffalo. "The real booze is, at this here minute, buried in the brush behind Grafter's Casino. And guardin' it, with a double-barreled shotgun, is Granville Truce, said Mayor of this man's town. I oughta know," he added, "I damn nigh broke my back makin' the switch last night."

"But I don't understand!" exclaimed the Captain, baffled by this new twist. "Are you in on this, too?"

"I reckon I'm in on this to put Grafter where he belongs, O'Donnel. Old man Truce ain't so crazy as folks think he is. He got up for some darn reason late last night an' happened to see Grafter's thieves hauling the liquor in this here blacksmith shop. He woke me, an' I savvy'd the outlay in a second. Knew it was some kind of a frame-up—that Grafter wasn't givin' anything away for nothing. So after his crew had beat it, Granville an' me hitches up his rig an' makes the change. Hair tonic for booze, and if you don't believe me, open every dog-gone one of them jars and see. Such a tough job I never had in my life—worse than mining. The whiskey we buried with Granville as the guard, which is a sort o' trick on Grafter. But yet, it's funny as hell when you come to think of it," added the hermit, grinning. "You see, Cap, you ain't got any evidence on Thompson after all. But you have got two citizens, good and true, who'll swear and prove the real booze came from Grafter's Casino—an' also you've got the booze itself and a darn good convincing yarn to back it up. Now arrest this no-good snake, O'Donnel, just as my old dad would have done."



## CHAPTER XIII

The fifteenth day of the new year, 1923, found the city of Truceville forgotten no longer. An orderly Main Street was edged by spotless cement gutters, bordered by broad sidewalks, and fronted by parallel rows of freshly painted, thriving, and prosperous structures. At precise intervals along the curbing, wrought-iron lamp-posts lent a metropolitan atmosphere to the thoroughfare. The numerous stores and merchandising shops were crowded by out-of-town ranchers, cowboys from the range, and those who had driven over from Columbus to do their shopping.

Thronged by salesmen and employees of the "Company," the Happy Heart Hotel did a constantly profitable business. In its luxuriously remodeled lobby, across the street in the brass and mahogany recesses of the First National Bank, behind the dignified walls of the Court House, and in fact, everywhere, an aroma of success permeated the air with the refreshing vigorousness of a thriving and contented community.

Greatest of all, in size, construction, and reputation, was the mammoth edifice that housed the Internationally advertised Nature's Products Company, Inc. Within this model factory, dozens of chemists and scientists experimented in a white tile laboratory; hundreds of workmen bent over specially designed heckling machines which pulverized the tough fibrous center of the yucca log and extracted pure creamy lather from its vegetable pulp. By a system of glass troughs this extracted juice of the desert plant was carried to great steam-jacketed cookers, where by an intricate process it was refined to a clear liquid, the color of sparkling wine. Then passed this marvelous product



to the preserving and perfuming department, where experts injected an essential quantity of alcohol to prevent deterioration, and the finest of French perfumes were introduced to multiply its already pleasing fragrance. Then came numerous rows of bottling tables where throngs of girls filled the quaint Indian pottery containers.

Upstairs in the luxurious offices, groups of managers, department heads, advertising specialists, and salesmen, conferred on new modes of business progress. In the large adobe building behind the factory itself, a contingent of Indian squaws modeled and baked the unique pottery that contained this now world famous juice of the yucca log. And out on the broad desert, caterpillar tractors harvested this bayonet-leaved plant, while crews of braves loaded it aboard specially constructed trucks with transmission and gears of a type designed to battle deep sand.

Throughout the land and in countries afar, drug stores, tonsorial shops and beauty parlors displayed and verified the merit of the desert's gift to the hair and scalp. Yucca Tonic and Shampoo were household words. Wherever there existed dandruff, falling hair, eczema, and diseases of the scalp, there was sure to be found one or more of the little sand colored pottery containers.

You read of its proven qualities in newspapers, periodicals, magazines and wherever there was print; you witnessed its history and primeval origin on the silver screens of cinema palaces, the radio lectured you about it; famous celebrities were pictured using it; the mails were flooded with communications from satisfied clients; in fact, Yucca Tonic and Shampoo was at the zenith of its prosperity.

And behind this successful commodity, in a magnificent office, sat three men: Granville Truce, President; Darcey Thompson, Vice-President, and J. "Buffalo" Jones, Treasurer—three men who had found, fought and conquered.

The time—late in the afternoon; the scene—the veranda of the new Truce residence; the characters—one, a girl, who was sad and glad simultaneously; the other a man, who remembered and was depressed.

Charles Christopher Meredyth, Jr., alias Darcey Thompson and among other things, General Manager of the Nature's Products Company, Inc., patted a slender, shapely hand and continued in a voice that vibrated with emotion:

"Pauline," he said, "I've been a dirty rotter in keeping this from you. Here we are, our engagement announced, marriage a week off, and I come to you like a beaten puppy frightened into confessing. There have been an hundred times, darling, in these last six months, when I've wanted to just blurt it out, even though I knew you might leave me forever. But I was a coward, dear, a dyed-in-the-wool coward. I loved you, I wanted you for my wife—and—and the thought of losing you nearly drove me mad. I couldn't, I couldn't let you go. But now I must confess. There is no other way out. I must tell the truth."

"If there's anything, Tommy," Pauline declared, "anything you've done in the past you're not proud of, I want you to tell me. I know you better than anybody; I love you; know how really wonderful you are, and whatever it is, I'm sure you're not to blame—you couldn't be. Now," she concluded after a pause, "tell me, Tommy, tell me just what it is."

"To start at the first," Gallop began, "I'm a liar. A rotten liar. Although neither you nor your father have even mentioned it, I know you know my name isn't Darcey Thompson—that I'm strutting in a dead man's shoes. I've used the name for two reasons, Pauline. First, because your dad called me by it. Second, because my own father won't allow me to use my own. I came to Truceville, dear, by orders—because I had disgraced myself, embarrassed my

father, made his name the laughing stock of New York. He threw me out after standing all he could. God, how I hurt him! How I, his only son, dragged him down by a repetition of vile, scandalous affairs. Darling, I've been a drunkard, a spender, a stage-door loafer—everything a fool with money can be. But that's not all, dear. I killed, I murdered an innocent man, in, well, in almost cold blood. Manslaughter, they called it. And money, my father's money, got me off. After that he was through, and I don't blame him. He's a great man, Pauline, a wonderful father. And now, I can't even say he's mine. Of course, he told me when I made a success to come back and all that. But I never will—that is, not as his son. Tomorrow, I leave for New York, Pauline. In five days I will be behind bars—charged with manslaughter. Now that I've worked and fought and made my mark here in an honest way, I'm going back and face the music. When I first left the city, darling, I didn't think seriously of my past. But now I realize what I've been. So tomorrow, dear, I'll be leaving. It's a low, dirty trick for me to have loved you, asked you to marry me, the way I have, and I know it. But when our romance first began, I thought I'd forget all my repulsive New York life. But now I know I can't, and never can. That is, not until I take my medicine like the man I'm trying to be. Please forgive me, Pauline. I know it's weak of me to ask, but I love you more than anything. And now I can't, I can't have you."

"Tommy," replied Pauline, biting her red under lip, her hands trembling, "nothing you've ever done in the past will change my opinion of you. To me, you're the most wonderful man in the world. Why, what you've done for father and me, and Truceville, wipes out everything in this past you claim to own. I know you've never murdered anybody—no matter what you say. You couldn't—you're far too big for anything like that, Tommy. You're a man,



a real man. And when you return from New York innocent of any crime, you're going to marry me, Tommy, you're going to be my husband—and that will make me the happiest girl in the world. I—”

“Calling Mr. Thompson,” interrupted a voice at the far end of the veranda. Gallop answered, and then one of the house servants appeared from a clump of ferns.

“Mr Truce would like you to step in the reception room, Mr. Thompson,” said the servant. “Officials representing the Santa Fe have arrived in regard to the branch railroad, he requested me to inform you.”

“I'm very busy,” replied Gallop. “Where is Buffalo? Perhaps he would do.”

“Sorry, sir, but he's trying out the new golf course this afternoon. Mr. Truce was quite particular that you come, Mr. Thompson, if it was in any way possible.”

“All right,” Gallop advised, “I'll be there, shortly.” Then he turned to Pauline. “Coming along?” he asked “or will you wait here?”

“I'll tag along,” came the reply. “I want to see father, anyway.”

When they presently entered the charmingly appointed reception chamber, Granville Truce accosted them.

“Tommy,” he said, “one of the big guns from the Santa Fe is in the library. It's up to you to convince him Truceville needs and deserves a railroad. Now go to it. Pauline and I will wait here.”

“I'll do my best,” Gallop declared. Then he crossed the large chamber, passed under the dividing arch, and faced the individual who sat quite composedly in a deep divan. Gallop's expression suddenly changed to one of sheer astonishment.

“Welcome, boy, welcome,” said the figure on the divan. “Your old dad congratulates you.”



It was no other than Charles Christopher Meredyth, himself. The realization shook Gallop's mind like a stunning blow. He gulped, blinked his bewildered eyes, then managed: "Dad! Dad! You've come—you've really—"

It was a tender scene that ensued; tender, especially for the grim financier. In part, it went something like this:

"Son," said the father, tears dimming his intensely blue eyes, "I've watched your actions from the very minute my secretary left you that last day. I've seen your stock soar up and up, like every stock I back always soars. You were mine, my own investment, and I knew, I knew you wouldn't fail. And you haven't boy, you haven't. You're more than I ever hoped for—your old dad is about the proudest man alive. And it's you that's made me so. You've done it, son; you've licked life and won."

"Then you mean I'm a Meredyth again, father?" Gallop's lips quivered as he spoke. "I can have back my name? You still want me as your son?"

"Want you?" repeated Charles Christopher Meredyth, "I'll crack that fighting head if you ever call yourself 'Thompson' again. That's how much I want you, son."

"But dad," the memory of a sordid incident returned to Gallop, "you forget about that charge of manslaughter. I can't allow you to own me until I return and take my medicine. It's not just, and would only mean a new scandal against your name."

"Scandal be damned!" exploded the genius of finance. "That's all in the past, son. Forget about it—I fixed that fool charge long ago."

"Well, I'm not satisfied, father. But now I want you to meet the girl who's going to be my wife, even if they give me fifteen years." Gallop crossed to the archway. "Pauline," he called, "will you and your father step in here a moment?"

As the girl and her father appeared at the threshold of the library, a paneled door on the opposite side of the room abruptly swung ajar. In upon the thick carpet stepped two persons who were never to be forgotten by Gallop. As he stared, unable to speak, the realization of their identities swamped his mind, rioted his emotions, and shook his frame. Here, of all times they had found him—the two detectives of that last scene in his father's office. They had tracked him down, trailed him, and now, before the ones he loved they would arrest him. Manslaughter! Gallop could almost see the charge stamped on the prison register. And then, relieving the embarrassing situation, Charles Christopher Meredyth cleared his throat and spoke:

"Son," he said, "I want you to meet Messrs. Smith and Cox—good cab drivers, good detectives, good attorneys, and better actors. And now," he added, turning to Pauline and her father, who looked on bewildered, "introduce me to my future daughter-in-law."

It was fully a minute before this last occurred,—the most delightful minute in Gallop's life. And for Pauline, as she thrilled to the ecstasy of his embrace, the happiest by far.

\* \* \*

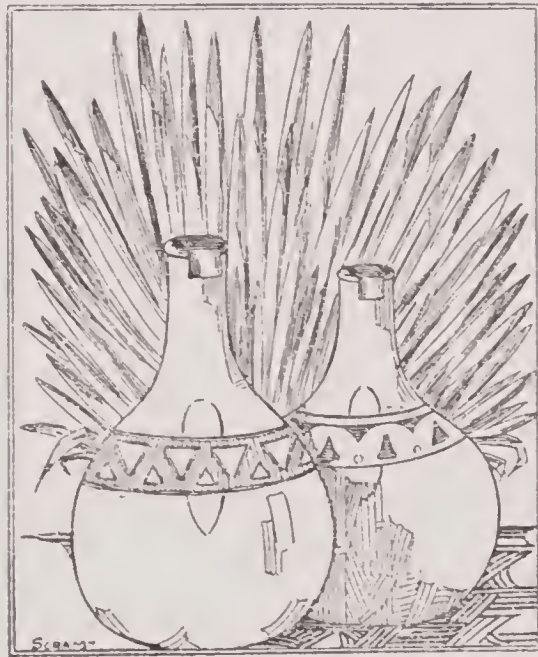
The Elizabeth Ann stage from Deming to Columbus, like the Colt forty-five, and Grafters' bandit gang, is a thing of the past. Dell MacKenney, the amiable old driver, now pilots a coughing and sputtering flivver over the one-time trail, but which has now been smoothed and paved to rival the finest boulevard in the land.

As he nears the desert junction of the three roads, he bites off a fresh chew and invariably remarks: "Here's where we turn for Truceville. A while back this was a sand trail to a forgotten burg. But no more," he adds. "Nope, no more. She's now the best little city on the border. And say," this he attempts to represent as an afterthought,

"I kin remember when us folks about here thought old man Truce, who founded the town, wuz crazy. But we've changed our idear, now. He's the smartest man in these parts—that is, leavin' out a young feller who's a sort of manager an' Sheriff combined. That last critter is sure one bright boy, I'll say."

And then, with a chug, off rambles the flivver toward a column of smoke that marks the factory of the Nature's Products Company, Inc.

## THE END















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